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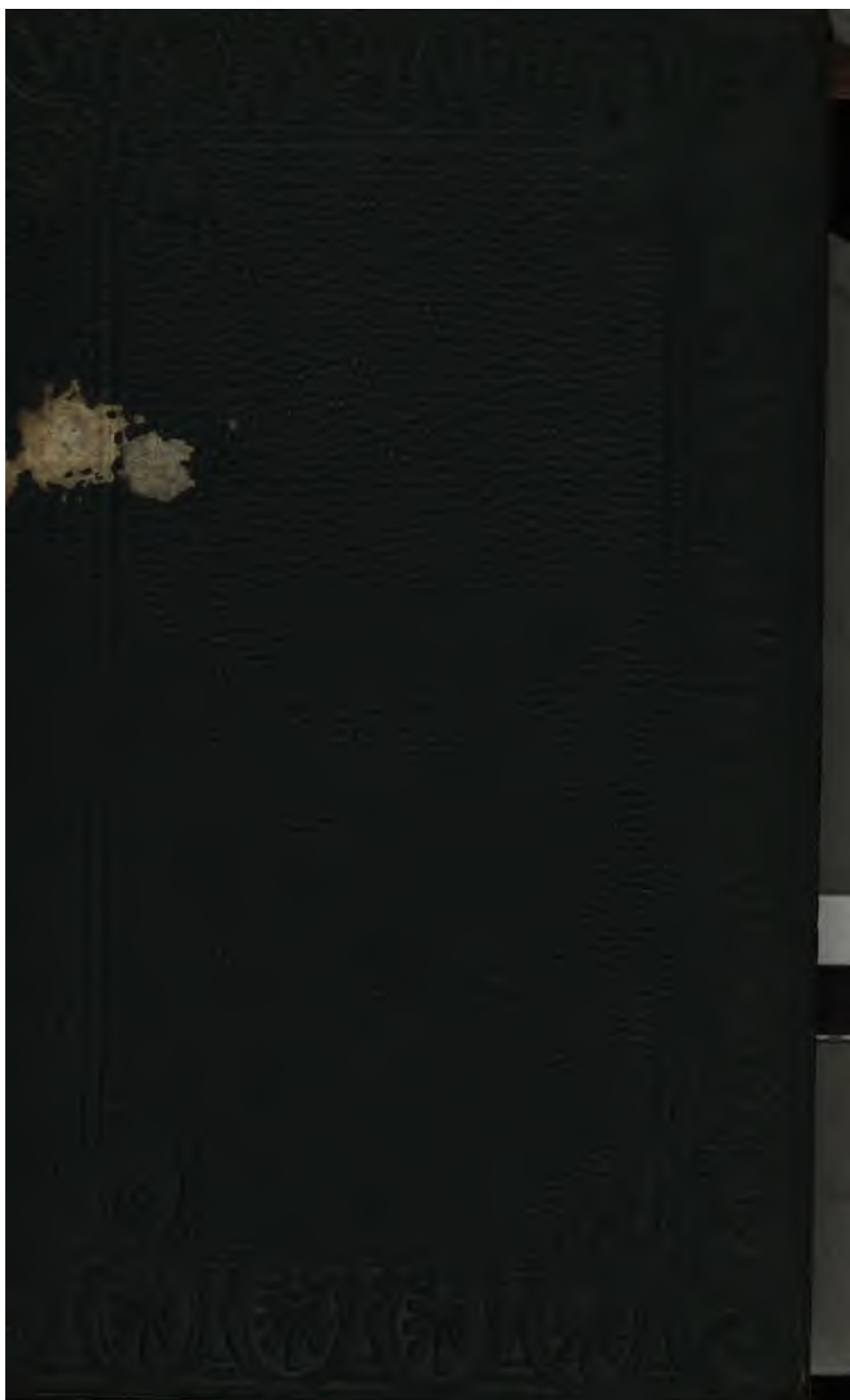
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FALLEN AMONG THIEVES.



FALLEN AMONG THIEVES.

A Novel of "Interest."

BY

ARTHUR À BECKETT.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1870.

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250. x. 111.



TAYLOR AND CO., PRINTERS,
LITTLE QUEEN STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS.

TO THE MEMORY
OF
GILBERT ABBOTT À BECKETT,

This Novel

IS
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

The Prologue.

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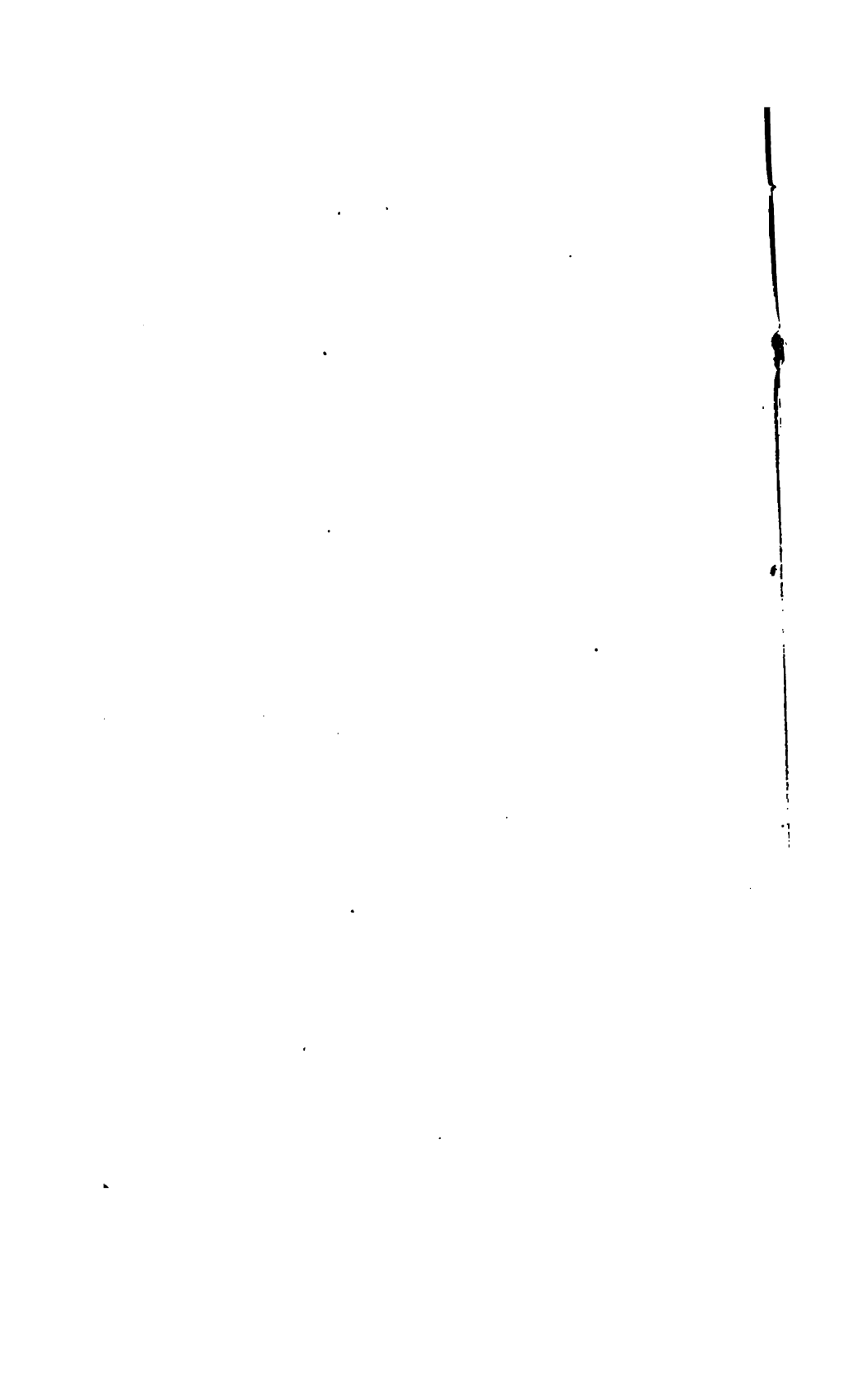
A LEGACY OF VENGEANCE.

VOL. I.

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FALLEN AMONG THIEVES.



CHAPTER I.

IN AND NEAR STELSTEAD CHURCHYARD.

THE afternoon of a very hot summer's day. The rays of the sun have beaten down upon many a mile of country; they have fallen upon brown fields, affording but scanty pasture to panting, fly-bitten cattle; have trembled upon the sleepy wavelets of streams that (before the heat) were wont to be rivers; have tipped the weathercock of many a village church with molten gold; have gambolled among the wind-shaken leaves of the trees, and have fought an endless battle with the shadows under the

hawthorn hedges. These same rays have been very impartial in their attack ; they have invaded town and village, field and park, mansion and hovel, nursery and churchyard. Can we be surprised, then, that true to their strict sense of justice, they have flooded with brilliant light the High-street, the Church, and Churchyard of the little village of Stelstead? With your very kind permission, we will attend upon the rays of the sun, and examine the the earth they kiss so fiercely ; not only the earth will we examine, but that which rests upon it.

First, then, let us enter the village Churchyard. You will say, "Well, the Stelsteadians have nothing to be proud of here. A few mounds, and two or three headstones, and an ugly, pretentious monument. Be proud of *this!* why the notion is preposterous." Dear reader, our villagers are *not* proud of their churchyard, but they

reverence every inch of it. Read the tombstones, with their quaint epitaphs and their strange carving. See how family after family, having lived together in brotherly love *on* earth, have refused to be parted *in* earth. See the flowers on the new-made graves, placed there by sun-burnt hands, and gazed upon by tear-dimmed eyes, belonging to sorrow-stricken faces. Oh, look at this, and let the flowers and the writing on the tombstones tell you that the poor spot is dear, very dear, to the simple people who live round about it. It contains sad memorials of a happy past, and the spire of the little church points upwards to the sky, holding out a promise of a glorious future. Yes, in sunshine and in rain, in summer storm and in winter snow, the churchyard is ever the same,—loved as the resting-place of sweet memories, revered as the land of the dead, the gateway to eternity. You have noticed “an ugly, pre-

tentious monument" standing among the mounds, with the air of a purse-proud *parvenu*. You see a sepulchre full of bones, and yet it seems to scorn the graves round about it. And are we not like this monument, with our pride and love of caste, with our haughtiness and our self-conceit? Oh, we are *so* much better and lovelier than our neighbours; our hair is *so* much glossier and our eyes *so* much brighter, our blood *so* much purer; and we admire and admire until we sink into the grave, and then the cruel clay laughs at us. Eyes and hair and blood melt into thin air, and the bones show, and the skulls become fleshless and hollow. And then, dear friends, examine the lord and the peasant, and you will find little difference in their beauty and loveliness. And then we lose sight of both; the bodies are gone, but their spirits live. But we can guess what will become of them; we know that in the Great Hereafter the

lord will wear his coronet, and the peasant will toil on for ever; we know that rank will carry with it weight, and that the bank-book of the wealthy will prove a sure passport to the Kingdom of Heaven! We know this, because it seems *so* reasonable that out of two worms, one should be feasted and the other crushed underfoot; so *very* sensible that Lazarus should groan while Dives laughs and is merry! You see we had a duty to perform at our birth; we came into this world equal; it was left to us to forge the chains that should bind our poor—to fashion the coronets that should crown our rich. Never openly acknowledged, these are really the sentiments of “Society”—of the society in which some of the characters of our story will breathe and have their being.

Believing firmly the creed of the world, Sir Ralph Ruthven had built the “ugly, pretentious monument” that seemingly has

given you so much offence. Although the family (of which in early life he had been the cadet) had lived in the Park hard by for centuries, it was only this generation that had embraced the faith of Christianity according to the Church of England. The old Roman Catholic Ruthvens lay buried in the mausoleum in the Park, and Sir Ralph, as a convert, naturally preferred to lie among the "faithful" in the village churchyard rather than to mingle his dust with the foolhardy soldiers and wily statesmen who had so scandalized him (by their creed) in the moss-grown monument at the end of the Long Walk. The Park and the baronetcy had come very unexpectedly to Sir Ralph. When he was studying at Cambridge, and was at one and the same time completing his conversion and preparing to take Holy Orders, with a view to filling the fat family living, so kindly placed at his service by a wealthy aunt, there had been

four good lives between him and the title and property. Perhaps as a reward for his exertions in the cause of true religion, these little obstacles in the way of his succession soon disappeared, and "Mr. Ralph Ruthven, of Trin. Coll. Camb." became "Sir Ralph Ruthven, Bart., of Stelstead Park, near Braintree, Essex." As a matter of course the "fat family living" was declined with thanks, and was offered to another. As it happened, the creed of Christianity according to the Church of England did not lose very much by Sir Ralph's secession from the priesthood, as the worthy gentleman (to be quite frank) was scarcely fitted to the office. He was a little wild, fond of wine and beauty, and although (of course) devotedly attached to the study of theology, a very good hand at billiards and whist. However, the convert was thoroughly sincere, and remained a Protestant in spite of not requiring any preferment at the hands of

Mother Church,—a fact very much, I think, to his credit. So when Sir Ralph came to Stelstead for the second time (he had stayed there on the previous occasion just before entering at Cambridge), he was warmly welcomed by the vicar and gentry. After a while, he married a lady of no great personal attraction, but with a considerable balance at her bankers; and in due course his wife presented him with a son and heir. Alas! Death (who is at best a disagreeable fellow) insisted upon calling upon the little child, and, as usual, treated him rather too roughly. So a fashionable undertaker came down from London, and there was a very grand *cortége* and a good deal of pomp and very much ceremony, and the tiny coffin was lowered into the ground. After a while, workmen began to build over the grave, and slowly the “ugly, pretentious monument” rose as you see it. When the sepulchre was quite finished, when the coat

of arms had been carved, and the name of the little child resting beneath all this pomp of masonry had been duly enrolled on the slab of granite, Sir Ralph thought he had done his duty to his fellow-man, and to that fellow-man's Creator. As a truthful historian, I must inform you that sometimes the baronet sighed when he remembered the little one, for Lady Ruthven had no other children, and a childless man is often sad.

I must also tell you that close to the grand monument and when the sun shone, well under its shadow, rose a little mound of earth, telling of a hidden coffin. Not very much was known about the contents of this coffin, but it *was* said that a miserable girl had been found dying at the doors of the Union one day, who, after her spirit had passed away (granting that the poor creature *had* a spirit), had been buried there. It was said that this poor girl had

insisted upon seeing Sir Ralph, and that baronet on hearing her name had at once consented to her wish. It was said that he had paid for her burial, and that when he visited the "ugly, pretentious monument," he carefully avoided treading over the grave hard by. People had talked over this (for there were very few subjects open to conversation in rural Stelstead), and some of them had said one thing, and some another, but most of them agreed that it was very easily explained: "in his youth, Sir Ralph had been rather wild."

As I have already said, the rays of the sun beat and burnt fiercely upon the village churchyard, fiercest of all upon the monument of the Ruthvens. Strange, you will say, of the rays,—more than strange, irreverent; for while the rays treated the armorial bearings of the patrician's tomb so cavalierly, they dealt mercifully with the poor girl's grave and left it unscathed. In

revenge, the Ruthven mausoleum, unable to spite the rays, turned its wrath upon its humble neighbour, and cast a cold, black shadow upon the little mound of earth,— a shadow that grew colder and blacker as the day wore on, until the sun sank down in the heavens, and left the earth to the stars, which shone impartially over both. But this had not happened yet; and as you take your parting look at Stelstead churchyard, before you attend me on my way down the little High-street, you will see the Ruthven monument standing out proudly in the brilliant sunlight and casting its black shadow o'er the grave of a nameless girl. Not much harm, for the monument is of carved stone, and the mound is of parched turf. Not much harm, again, for *he* was of blue blood, you know, and *she*—but never mind about her; let the grave keep its secret!

There, we have had enough of the skull

and cross-bones, and now let us stroll down the High-street on our way to the stage where the opening scene of our story will be laid, to the shop of Jas Samson, the village shoemaker. We have not far to go; we have but to pass the establishment of the grocer, where so much may be bought by his customers; where hats of ancient shape and cheap coffees, adulterated with expensive chicory, are always on hand; where toys and soap, dressing-gowns and butter, corduroys and French plums, and a thousand other articles, can be had for the asking, or rather the paying. Let us pass by the chemist, who sells such bad cigars, and the butcher, who supplies one with such indifferent note-paper. Let us leave the curate's cottage, with its modest garden, on our right, and the wealthy London merchant's red brick house, with its vulgar paling, on our left, and then let us pass by the old curiosity shop, and the Bell Inn,

and the yard of the Ruthven Arms, and the villa of the local surgeon, and we shall come to the Green. Pass over the Green, without frightening the geese, and the shop and house of Jas Samson is before us.

It is a funny-looking place: first, we have the ordinary cottage of the country, with the little lattice windows and the thatched roof, with the whitewashed walls and leafy creeper. But Jas has not been satisfied with this, and has added a wing to his residence of peculiar shape and ambitious pretensions. Although adjoining the main body of the house, it is quite out of keeping with its general style and appearance. This wonderful wing has slates upon its roof and a weathercock over the slates,—a projection supported by a clumsy-looking column, and plate glass in all the windows; and under this gorgeous story Jas has made his shop. As we approach the house we find the old fellow hard at work.

Jas Samson is not unlike his house. A plain English rustic by nature, he resembled the body of his house in his youth, while the wonderful wing (the acquired part of his house and character) came with fast advancing years and Jas's increasing store of book knowledge. Our friend is looked upon in the village as a kind, good-natured fellow in practice, but a very terrible republican in theory. If you listened to his talk, you would thank your stars that the English nation was aristocratic to the backbone, and not easily influenced by blood-seeking democrats. You would hear Jas denouncing lords and ladies, and calling fiercely for their coronets and estates. You would hear him praising Robespierre, lauding Marat to the skies, and yet this savage leveller would be the last man in the world to hurt a fly or to refuse a beggar a crust of bread. More than this, he was always on the side of the authorities, and did no

little, by his influence, to prevent poaching and excessive drinking. He treated with the greatest respect Sir Ralph and his lady, and was a prime favourite with the nieces of the baronet, Edith and Florence Ruthven, who (as everybody in the village knew) had been adopted by their illustrious relative, and were one day to share his wealth,—the wealth that had been secured by “limited liability” companies and lucky nights at the Hamilton Whist Club. He was greatly revered by his own class, and respected by those who belonged to a higher grade of society. But Jas was very independent, and was better pleased to make his own favourites than to find patrons. He had a great many likings, and two noted aversions: first (although a “broad church” man), he was very fond of the Roman Catholic priest who said mass at the little chapel on the hill (the chapel that had been built by the Ruthven family

in years gone by), and wonderful controversies used these two to have, on quiet summer's evenings, under the trees at the back of Jas's cottage. "Mr. Dutton," he would say, "is very wrong about some things. He's clever, but a deal too bigoted about bits o' doctrine. He's not of my thinking about dignitaries, and is always wanting to submit to them in authority. But Mr. Dutton is a gentleman, a thorough gentleman—I will say more, Mr. Dutton is a *man*," and the old fellow would puff away at his pipe, with his eyes absolutely sparkling with satisfaction. Another of Jas's favourites was Miss Florence Ruthven, the young lady who lived at the Hall hard by. The shoemaker, like the rest of the little world, could be twisted round this charming maiden's finger with perfect ease. "Miss Florence is as nice a young lady as you would wish to see," Jas would say. "She's a beauty; but, mark my words, when she


gets into the world, the world will spoil her. I like to listen to her merry laugh, but that same laugh wants a deal of ballast before it will be *quite* right. The third and greatest of Jas's favourites was Leopold Lawson, the son of Sir Ralph's agent. Jas really loved the young fellow, and was never tired of singing his praises. He took the liveliest interest in his success, and had carefully trained his mind in early years to hate tyrants and denounce aristocrats. When Sir Ralph sent this young fellow to Oxford, "as a mark of respect to, and as a small return for many services received from his agent, John Lawson," (although it was well known that the baronet and his confidential man were always quarrelling), Jas rejoiced exceedingly, and took the lord of the village (once his aversion) into his favour, and defended him on all possible occasions. "Leopold, my boy," said Jas, when young Lawson came to bid him adieu,

“don't you forget what I taught you before you went to school. Mind, my boy, you defend Cromwell; and if they offer you a coronet at this here university (and they are a hartful set) to turn traitor, why, don't you take it!”

Leopold promised that he would refuse the bribe, and they parted with much show of affection.

Having told you of the favourites of Jas, it is only fair that you should hear of his aversions. First, he disliked Lady Ruthven. Her Ladyship had somehow or other given him mortal offence, and nothing she could do had the power to please him. The wife of Sir Ralph was not very popular among the villagers; she was not exactly haughty, but she certainly was not gracious; and she had no feeling (unlike her niece Edith, who was all kindness to the poor and suffering) for those who asked for charity or good words. More than this, she

loved admiration with an all-absorbing passion, and was ready to flirt with any one who would bow down before her and flatter her. She dressed "younger" than her two nieces, and had been engaged (for the last fifteen years) in a battle with Time. She met his attacks upon her face with rouge and paint, and filled up the breaches he made in her once glossy locks with false hair and "Lily-water of Circassia." Bravely she fought, but with less and less chance of success. She grew weaker and weaker, but still refused to surrender. The more wrinkles Time cut into her face, the more *blanc de perle* was plastered on her forehead; the balder his scythe left her poor head, the more luxurious became her flowing wigs. It was a painful sight to see the wretched creature contending with so much exertion for so little. It was even more painful to watch her in the drawing-room, with her mincing gait and girlish giggle, striving to




convince her guests that she was still young—that Time had forgotten her.

Jas, who hated everything unreal and unmanly, hated this affectation; and perhaps in this trait in her character lay the secret of his dislike for Lady Ruthven. His second and greatest aversion—strange to say—was Leopold's father,—John Lawson, Sir Ralph's agent and confidential adviser; and this man Jas loathed as he hated the very enemy of mankind himself. Nothing he could say was too bad for him, and it was the one point on which he and his favourite Leopold had any difference.

And here let me tell you something that may strike you as remarkable. When Lawson first took up his residence at Stelstead some twenty years before the commencement of our story, he attempted to make friends with the village cobbler. But no, Jas would not hear of it, and met all advances with sneers and taunts, and even

open insult. Lawson was a very violent man, and resented this treatment—but only once. On the occasion to which I have alluded, Jas said something so disagreeable in reply, that it made Lawson tremble and turn as pale as a sheet. What that something was may ooze out in the course of our story, but here it is only necessary to describe its effect. From that moment, Lawson—rough to every one else—became as polite as a courtier to the man of awls and shoe leather—so polite, that people wondered, frowned, and whispered. As for Jas, he was no more civil to his neighbour than before their altercation; and so the pair lived on, Lawson cringing like a beaten cur, Jas roaring like an indignant lion. And now, having told you something about Jas's likes and dislikes, I will introduce you to him personally. See, there he sits, with his shaggy white hair, and clear blue eyes, and smiling lips; there he sits, and health




rests upon his ruddy cheeks, and good-nature sounds in every tone of his cheery voice. Listen to him.

“Another pair o’ boots to be mended for my Lady,” he is saying to a very tall flunkey, who is lounging by the doorpost, “well, this sole is easier mended than another I know of.”

“You means my Leddy’s *own* soul, Jas,” replies the footman laughing; “yes, that ’ere soul *is* rayther fishy.”

“I *means* nothing of the sort, Mr. Calves-and-hair-powder,” we hear Jas say rather angrily, for the old man hates to have his jokes improved upon; “and Mr. Calves-and-hair-powder, I will thank you, if you have not the manners to support them as gives you food and drink, and supplies you with hair-powder *and* calves, to have the manners not to call me out of my name. Put that in your pipe, Mr. Hair-powder-and-calves, and, if you’re partial to a cigar, be good enough to smoke it.”



“No offence meant, Mr. Samson,” replies the tall footman.

“Then no offence is taken, John Dixon,” says Jas heartily. “Here, my lad, just give me your hand.”

John hesitates, as he looks at his own coarse but clean paw, and compares it with the grimy palm of the village cobbler, upon which Jas exclaims, “Don’t be afraid, my lad, all men are ekals; your calves ain’t your fault, they’re only your misfortune; why, I might have been hanged or worn hair-powder myself, if my parents had neglected my edication. Never be ashamed of your calling, my lad, if so be it’s honest.”

With not a very good grace, John stretches out his hand, which is duly wrung, and, of course, in the operation, plentifully marked with beeswax.

“Well, John, and how are things going at the Hall?” asks the cobbler, after the ceremony of reconciliation has been completed.

“Ow can I tell you, Mr. Samson, when you abuses me for everythink I says about them as guvs me 'air-powder? No one guv me calves but natur,” observes John in an injured tone.

“Now, my lad, don't attempt to argey with me, because I gives you warning it won't do,” says Jas, who is burning with curiosity to hear a little news. “Of course, don't *abuse* your employers, but you can tell me something about 'em.”

“I can tell you nothing about Sir Ralph and my Leddy without abusing on 'em both.”

“Then do it,” says Jas; “we are all of us ekals.”

“Well, then, them two is always a quarrelling. Sir Ralph, he is as jealous as a —as a peacock, and my Leddy, she gets more ridicklus every day. And what with their bad tempers, and squabbling, and words, we poor servants 'ave a werry 'ard

time of it. Every morning I takes in the letter-bag to Sir Ralph, I've a good 'alf mind to carry in 'is dismissal with it. I would if it weren't for the perkisites."

"And the young ladies?"

"Oh, Miss Edith, she's as quiet and 'aughty as ever, a always attending to everything, a 'elping 'er aunt and a wisiting the sick and the poor. I wonder she can let 'erself down to sich a thing! She, with sich proud notions, too!"

"She's a good girl, my lad," says Jas; "she's a little high and mighty, but she's a good girl; and how's Miss Florence? I haven't seen her for many a day."

"Just the same, Mr. Samson," replies John, "the life and soul of the 'ouse, but as flighty as a kitten. She never sees a young gentleman without making eyes at him."

"Yes, John, she *is* a little flighty."

"Flighty, Mr. Samson, why, if she'd been

Eve, I do believe she would 'ave made love to Adam while she was in a state of rib! I do, indeed, that I do!"

At this moment the hoofs of a horse, which have been heard in the distance for some little time, resound on the stones of the High-street, and a gentleman pulls up at the cobbler's door. He is dressed slangily, and carries a heavy riding-whip. He is about the middle age, has iron-grey hair, and a long moustache, deep-set eyes, and sharp features. "Here, my man, can you tell me the way to Mr. Lawson's?" says this gentleman, giving his horse, who is a little restive, a savage lash with his whip.

"Thought so," murmurs Jas; "knew he was a friend of Lawson's. Bad face—nice pair!"

John gives the requisite directions. "You rides along that there road until you comes to a 'aystack, Sir, turn to your left,

and you'll come to a row of cottages; after you've passed 'em, and before you come to another row, you will find a small white-washed 'ouse; that's Mr. Lawson's."

"Thanks," replies the gentleman carelessly. "Know of any good inn?"

"The best in the place, Sir, is the Ruthven Arms—to the right there."

"Thanks, I think I shall go there first before I call upon Mr. Lawson. My visit will keep, and riding makes one confoundedly hungry." Another savage lash, and the horse and his rider are gone.

"A bad face!" repeats Jas; "a very bad face! A black heart, I'll be sworn."

By-and-by the church clock strikes, and John, who has very little to say for himself at any time, and very little *indeed* to say for himself on this particular afternoon, takes himself off, and walks towards the Hall.

Jas left alone begins to work mechani-

cally, while his thoughts are evidently straying far away from his little shop. Sad thoughts, to judge from the expression of his face. "Poor boy!" he murmurs, "I can never tell him; and yet—" and his thoughts flow on. It is getting late now, and the sun is sinking gloriously in the heavens. The sky is ablaze with purple and gold. The red light streams in at the door, and falls upon the old man at his work. Still thinking and thinking, and the sun has set.

Once more the hoofs of a horse are heard resounding on the stones, followed by the roll of wheels. Nearer and nearer, and the horse stops. A young man of the Anglo-Saxon type, blue-eyed, flaxen-haired, and with a fine open countenance, rushes into the shop, and grasps the village cobbler's hands, and shakes them heartily.

"My dear old Jas, I am so glad to see you. Are all well at the Hall?"

“Yes, Leopold, my lad. But let’s have a look at you. Hallo, how’s this? Why you’re as pale as a ghost—you’ve been and left all your colour at that there university.”

“Never mind me; but Jas, how’s—how’s—tell me—you know what I mean.”

“Miss Florence?” asks Jas with a faint smile.

The boy—he is scarcely more than a boy—nods and blushes. The smile on the face of the old man is sad, sweet, and calm, —sad and sweet as the purple clouds that are floating even now behind the little spire of the village church; as calm as the flowers when the evening grows late, and the dark night robs them of their glorious hues, and clothes them in mourning, and fully, fully as sorrowful!

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER PLAYS WITH FIRE!

LET us have no mystery about the matter—Leopold was in love. And let me say more—it was no fault of his that he *was* in love. The young lady alluded to in the last chapter as Florence was one of those pests of mankind commonly known as flirts; and it was Miss Florence who had secured the very susceptible heart of Master Leopold. Youth and maid had seen much of one another from early childhood, as Florence had been adopted by her uncle, and had lived constantly at Stelstead, while

Leopold had been educated at the grammar-school of the village, and consequently had never been called away from his native place. Thus these two young people had had frequent opportunities of seeing one another—opportunities that had not been neglected by one of the parties.

Florence Ruthven was a jilt *pure et simple*, and she had done her best to make Leopold Lawson fall in love with her. She had glanced at him with half-closed and bashful eyes, and had blushed when they had met in the village High-street, and had lazily but distinctly pressed the hand he offered to her; and in their converse had talked sentiment and poetry, and had been *só* innocent. He had never declared his love; how could he muster up courage to play so important a card in the game of life? No, the stakes were too high; so, while dying to win, he refrained from taking the only step that could give

him a chance of victory, for, you see, he was *so* fearful of defeat. More than this, Florence's sister, Edith, had seen the cards of the game, and knew the hands of the players; knowing this, and hating Leopold for his obscure birth, or for some equally excellent reason, she had carefully guarded the prize that he wished to secure. Still, Florence gave him all the encouragement in her power, as she would have given encouragement to the Grand Turk failing a better, or to the very Serpent himself had she found herself alone with him in the Garden of Eden. And our poor friend Leopold fell into the snare. He knew her faults, saw her flirtations, watched her cruelty. He knew she was frivolous and heartless, but he forgave her all for the sake of her deep blue eyes and sweet brown hair and pleasant smile. He forgave her, and loved her with all his heart and soul. And she knew it, and was as

much touched by his devotion as the flame of a candle is affected by the martyrdom of the moth that has just ceased to buzz around it. But he hoped that her nature would change; he prayed that as she grew older her frivolity might disappear,—that her fickleness might become a thing of the past. For the sake of Leopold (who, I assure you, is a really good fellow, and a man whom I trust you will like), let us hope and pray so too.

And now you know something of the piece; you have seen the curtain rise upon two mysteries. You have guessed that a secret lies hidden in the little grave beneath the shadow of the Ruthven mausoleum, and you have been told that Lawson, senior, goes about in fear of Jas Samson, the village cobbler. You have seen, too, some sketches of our principal characters; bide a wee, and their originals shall speak for themselves. To conclude, I have hinted at

the loves of Leopold and Florence, of the well-educated low-born village lad and the fickle aristocratic country maiden. Moreover, you have had a passing glimpse of a stranger on horseback with (to quote Jas's words) an "evil face," and you have heard from that stranger's own lips that he purposes paying Lawson, senior, a visit after dining at the Ruthven Arms. Having impressed all these facts and fancies upon your mind, I beg to cry *en voyage*.

The dinner is over, and, with your kind permission, we will follow our horseman on his way to the house of the "confidential adviser" of Sir Ralph, to the abode of "John Lawson, Esq." So that the "chevalier" (as the French call those of their nation who ride upon a horse) may be worthily received, we will run on before him. We will float by the cottages with their creepers, and the ducks with their wonderful antics, and the boys with their wild joy-

ous shouts, and we will enter a garden that lies before a small whitewashed house. We will not pass the door, for we shall find all that we want among the flower-beds and the flowers. See, we have plenty of roses, some of them modest, and blushing at their own beauty, others proud and insisting upon blooming on tall stalks, where all may see and admire them. Among these flowers we shall find a man with shaggy white hair, and a hard red face furrowed and deeply marked,—a man who has seen (to judge from the lines on his forehead) a great deal of bitter misery, but who, it would appear (if we may guess from his expression), has passed through the ordeal with a heart of stone and a will of iron; a man who scoffs at God from very fear of His vengeance, and who *dares* not believe in the Providence he *has* wronged so grievously. But still this man is fond of tending his flowers, and greedily breathes the

air laden with perfume which exhales from their opening blossoms.

His face is in repose now as he quietly prunes away the leaves that cumber his plants. The twilight is fast deepening into night, and more than one star has made its appearance in the sky. Opposite the house is a small inn, where some farm-labourers are drinking and singing. The noise made by the boors floats dreamily on the wind, and contrasts strongly with the song of a nightingale hymning her way through the heavens. Nature is not quite asleep—only dozing.

The clatter of a horse's hoofs, and the stranger rides up to the garden-gate; rides up and calls a lad who is playing on the green grass by the roadside yonder to hold the bridle, looks round him, sees the white house, and dismounts.

“A fellow of the name of Lawson lives here?”

"I am Mr. Lawson," says the old man, looking hard at his questioner from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"Oh, *you* are Mr. Lawson. Very well, *Mister* Lawson, show the way into your house, for I want to have a little private conversation with you, *Mister* Lawson!"

Lawson seems half inclined to resent this speech (which is delivered in a scornful, insulting tone) when the stranger continues—

"You had better obey me, Mr. Lawson, for perhaps those gentlemen," and he points to the farm-labourers who have left their beer-mugs for a moment to look at the horse and its rider, "don't know *all* your history. You seem comfortable and respectable here, although I see, in changing your house, you have chosen a smaller place than your last residence. You are quite right, too; your taste is excellent; for an unmarried man your residence at Portland was really too large!"

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER PLAYS WITH FIRE!

LET us have no mystery about the matter—Leopold was in love. And let me say more—it was no fault of his that he *was* in love. The young lady alluded to in the last chapter as Florence was one of those pests of mankind commonly known as flirts; and it was Miss Florence who had secured the very susceptible heart of Master Leopold. Youth and maid had seen much of one another from early childhood, as Florence had been adopted by her uncle, and had lived constantly at Stelstead, while

Leopold had been educated at the grammar-school of the village, and consequently had never been called away from his native place. Thus these two young people had had frequent opportunities of seeing one another—opportunities that had not been neglected by one of the parties.

Florence Ruthven was a jilt *pure et simple*, and she had done her best to make Leopold Lawson fall in love with her. She had glanced at him with half-closed and bashful eyes, and had blushed when they had met in the village High-street, and had lazily but distinctly pressed the hand he offered to her; and in their converse had talked sentiment and poetry, and had been *só* innocent. He had never declared his love; how could he muster up courage to play so important a card in the game of life? No, the stakes were too high; so, while dying to win, he refrained from taking the only step that could give

him a chance of victory, for, you see, he was *so* fearful of defeat. More than this, Florence's sister, Edith, had seen the cards of the game, and knew the hands of the players; knowing this, and hating Leopold for his obscure birth, or for some equally excellent reason, she had carefully guarded the prize that he wished to secure. Still, Florence gave him all the encouragement in her power, as she would have given encouragement to the Grand Turk failing a better, or to the very Serpent himself had she found herself alone with him in the Garden of Eden. And our poor friend Leopold fell into the snare. He knew her faults, saw her flirtations, watched her cruelty. He knew she was frivolous and heartless, but he forgave her all for the sake of her deep blue eyes and sweet brown hair and pleasant smile. He forgave her, and loved her with all his heart and soul. And she knew it, and was as


much touched by his devotion as the flame of a candle is affected by the martyrdom of the moth that has just ceased to buzz around it. But he hoped that her nature would change; he prayed that as she grew older her frivolity might disappear,—that her fickleness might become a thing of the past. For the sake of Leopold (who, I assure you, is a really good fellow, and a man whom I trust you will like), let us hope and pray so too.

And now you know something of the piece; you have seen the curtain rise upon two mysteries. You have guessed that a secret lies hidden in the little grave beneath the shadow of the Ruthven mausoleum, and you have been told that Lawson, senior, goes about in fear of Jas Samson, the village cobbler. You have seen, too, some sketches of our principal characters; bide a wee, and their originals shall speak for themselves. To conclude, I have hinted at

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Lawson starts, turns blood-red and then snow-white. He says not a word, however, but opens the garden-gate. He opens the garden-gate, and precedes the stranger into the house. The stranger throws himself carelessly on a chair, and watches with a smile playing on his bold, wicked, handsome face, his host putting-to the door. He is still smiling when Lawson confronts him.

“Who are you, and what do you want?”

“Pardonable curiosity, my dear friend, and because the curiosity *is* pardonable, I will answer both your questions to the best of my ability. But first make yourself comfortable. Come, sit down,” and the stranger looks round the room, and notes that it is not only snug, but furnished with some attempt at luxury. “You seem to be cozy here. Why, you’ve become quite a literary character if all those books belong to you,” and he nods towards a well-filled bookcase.

“Those do *not* belong to me, they belong to my son.”

“Oh, you have a son, have you? So much the better. As a good and respectable father, you will be careful to leave him a stainless name. Quite right, my dear Sir. I congratulate you upon your benevolence.”

“There you are wrong,” replies Lawson quickly (he has fetched a spirit-case and two glasses, and has set them on the table beside which his visitor is sitting), “there you are wrong. I don’t care a jot what name the owner of those books carries to the grave. You’ve made a false step—you can’t get at me through *him!*”

“Unnatural parent! But come, I must convert you. I am sure you have not thought sufficiently of the cruelty of your conduct. Here, sit down at the table. As I said before, make yourself comfortable.”

Lawson obeys the first part of the com-

mand, that is to say, he sits at the table, then he fills up the two glasses with brandy, tosses one of them off, and looks once more full into the face of his guest, and says, "Who are you?"

"Who am I? And so our dearly-beloved brother John Lawson, once a clerk in the house of Tibalt, Jones, and Co., then a prisoner before Her Majesty's judges, then a felon convicted of forgery at Portland, and, lastly, a respectable inhabitant of Stelstead, Essex, has forgotten all his old friends, every one of them!"

Lawson is frightfully pale, but still he keeps his calmness. His hand quivers just a little as he raises the second glass of spirits to his mouth. He gulps it down safely, however, and repeats, "Enough of this. Who are you?"

"Who am I?" says the stranger; "and now that I think of it, why should I tell you? My dear Master Lawson, so long as

I know who *you* are, there is no earthly reason why you should know *me* ;” and he laughs a strange chuckling laugh, and pulls at his moustache with a flourish of his right hand.

Lawson suddenly springs to his feet, and his eyes flash fire. “ Ah! now I know who you are. Good God! how could I have forgotten *your* features! D— you! It was you who led me on to my ruin; it was you who almost guided my hand as I forged the note that was to pay your importunate demands for the money I owed you; it was you who stole my honour in the witness-box; it was *you*, Raymond, who sent me across the sea. And *you* dare to come here and confront *me*! By God! it shall cost you your life!” He rushes to the table and rummages in a drawer, swears a heavy oath because the object of his search is not to hand, and then prepares to spring upon his enemy.

“None of that!” cries the stranger savagely, holding his whip with the handle downwards. “I did not come here to help you to play a melodrama, but I warn you to keep your temper. You know me of old, and can rely upon my word. Raise your hand towards me again, and I will brain you with the smallest compunction; on my soul I will! So drop it, d’ye hear?—drop it!”

Lawson is trembling with passion and fear, and sinks on to his chair with a heavy sigh. There is a silence for a moment, and then a hoarse whisper is heard, “What do you want?”

“Ah, now you talk like a sensible fellow again,” says Raymond, regaining his calmness. “I’m glad you have dropped your heroics. You can’t imagine how absurd you looked rummaging in that drawer—for a pistol, possibly?”

“Had I found it you would not have lived to jeer at me.”

“Come, come, my dear fellow, these are nice clean planks, but they are not the boards of the Victoria. Here we have a moderator-lamp, not footlights. We have no music, no audience, no prompter.”

“Don’t be too sure of that! the devil is often at my elbow!”

“Birds of a feather—you know the rest,” replies Raymond with a laugh. “But, come, I didn’t call upon you to bandy compliments.”

“Again I ask of you what do you want with me?”

“Well, my dear friend, I find you in this village, in comfortable circumstances, and your early history unknown. You have asked me how I dared to remind you of the past. It’s because I *do* know the past that I call upon you. You have to make a choice—to weigh two little things in the scale. Consent to my demands, and you remain oh! *highly* respectable; refuse them,

and I fear your history must be published in every cottage in Stelstead."

"Scoundrel!"

"Come, no hard words, remember you still are respectable; you haven't been obliged to turn strolling player *yet!*"

"What do you require of me?—as yet I don't know your demands."

"How clear-headed you are! To be sure, of course you don't. But before making my little request, I wished to impress upon your mind what were and what are our respective positions,—to prove to you that one of us would have to be the servant while the other remained the master."

"Well, what more?"

"Having proved this, I have only to tell you my wishes. I've got a little love affair on hand. Don't blush, my sweet saint, for I assure you it's perfectly innocent. It is merely a matter of *£. s. d.* Cupid has been dabbling in money matters. Now, I want

a confidant, a dear friend with whom I can take counsel, in whom, perhaps, I may find assistance. Naturally, I have chosen you, Lawson, to be that dear friend. Come, then, my boy, come, most generous of men, and aid the bosom companion of your youth, the tried ally of your riper years."

"What do you want?"

"What do I want? Why, first,—and this is the most important point,—I want your sympathy, your kind sympathy, dear brother; then I want this letter carried to the lady to whom it is addressed; lastly I want the key to the garden-door of the Park; when calling on Sir Ralph's family, I have no wish to give unnecessary trouble to the lodge-keeper."

"Do you know the risk you are running?" asks Lawson, gazing at the letter and its address with a face full of surprise and alarm.

"Dear friend," says Raymond, still using

the mocking tone that has characterized every word he has uttered in the presence of his host. "Have no fear for me, I beseech you. As I said before, it is a matter rather of *£. s. d.* than love. Ah, that's all I want."

He takes up a key, to which is attached a bone label, bearing the following inscription, "GARDEN GATE, JOHN LAWSON," and puts it in his pocket.

"You won't forget the letter?" he says and leaves his chair, and makes for the door. The two go out together. Raymond mounts his horse, and Lawson stands in the centre of the road. The horse trots off towards the Ruthven Arms, and Lawson is left in the road. When the horse has trotted off, Lawson loses his calmness, and shakes his fist at the retreating figure. He cries out a bitter curse and a bitter threat, stands quite still a moment, and then walks slowly towards his house. As he leaves

them, the farm-labourers, who have given up their beer for a moment to look at the stranger riding off, gaze intently at the now distant horseman. The simple rustics think it must be a remarkable man who can thus anger "Muster Lawson" so greatly.

CHAPTER III.

THE SKELETON PEEPS FROM THE CUPBOARD.


A CHANGE of scene. We have had enough of village boors and country agents; we have breathed the fresh air of heaven and smelt the sweet fragrance of the flowers,—all very well in their way for an hour or so, but now we must adapt ourselves to our company and become as cynical as Diogenes, as hard as Dives. We must put on our most sceptical smile, and make our heart as stony as stony can be, for we are about to have the honour of an introduction to no less a person than Frederick

Dalyell Holston, youngest son of Sir William Holston, Bart., of Holston Park, Derbyshire. The Holstons are a wonderful family; they are as rich as Cræsus and as clever as the present Emperor of the French. There can be no doubt about their "jewels of silver and of gold;" and as for their cleverness, did not Sir William introduce into use on his estate a reaping machine, which would have been *exceedingly* nice, but for one drawback; in its extreme anxiety to get through its work, it left nothing to be gathered together after the reaping? Again, did not Captain Holston, of the Fusilier Guards (the "eldest son" of the baronet), construct a gun which had the virtue of firing all ways at once, to the intense annoyance of foes and (in this peculiarity lay its only fault) the extreme embarrassment of *friends*? And lastly, did not Freddy, already mentioned, write an article a few seasons ago, which absolutely appeared in

the highly respectable pages of the 'London Laudanum'? After you've heard all this, you surely will have no doubt about the cleverness of the family!

Pray follow me into Stelstead Hall. We have ascended the old oak staircase, with its carved lions and shields, and have found it too dark, in the fast-fading twilight, to distinguish much of the family portraits which hang to the wainscoted walls. We have passed the door of "my lady's" room, and have been far too gentlemanly to peep through the keyhole, to watch the fair enchantress emptying her rouge pot, and applying her *blanc de perle*. We have left the chamber resounding with girlish laughter, which evidently is appropriated by the "young ladies;" and are facing the door of Freddy's sanctum. You needn't knock, because he won't hear us; a moment more, and see, we are standing behind him.

As we might have expected, he is sitting before his toilet glass working out a problem,—a most difficult one, if we may judge from his rather anxious face. On the table before him are his watch and chain, his cigar case, some sovereigns, some shillings, and a “bone” for the opera. Within easy reach of his hand is a large writing-desk, the resting-place of many a five-act comedy, destined, some day, to take the town by storm. On the bed are his evening clothes and his linen, and now we get a clue to his thoughts. The most indifferent of men, the most careless of spectators will notice that his shirt and collar lack a “something” to complete their magnificence, — a “something” without which the finest starch will be as nought, the most brilliant of studs as useless as stale bread, as unnecessary as county-court summonses! Ah, I see that you have guessed what I mean; you have discovered




that Freddy's evening dress lacks a necktie. Quite so, you are right; and now you can guess what he is thinking about, you know the secret of his anxiety.

"Shall it be white, or shall it be black?" murmurs Freddy, stroking his long auburn moustache and gazing intently into the looking-glass.

Ah, I see you have set the man down as a fop and a fool. You are wrong; Holston is neither one nor the other; he is no fop, but he worships himself and is for ever adorning the altar of his divinity. The "man" is no fool be sure, at least (and *I* add this to soothe the prejudices of the "goody-goody") in a worldly sense. Foolish! why we all know that there is nothing "foolish" in scoffing at God and laughing at nine-tenths of his commandments! We know that there is nothing "foolish" in regarding all men as knaves, and most women as brute beasts! There is nothing

“foolish,” is there ? now that we are “here,” in scoffing, as at idle fables, at the tales of a coming “hereafter!” Freddy is brilliant and witty, and can write a slashing article disposing for once and for ever of God’s justice and woman’s purity ; and everybody knows that a man who can do *this* can be no fool ! He has left his morality in France, the scene of his earlier years, and here again is a fresh proof of his wisdom—if any people on the face of the earth require a little morality, those people are the French !

If you come to think of it, there is nothing very foolish in Freddy’s anxiety about his cravat. You see he has his body and his mind ; the two, with some three hundred a year, make up the sum of his earthly possessions. Like a good gardener, who arranges his flowers to the best advantage, Holston is for ever dressing his body ; arranged to good advantage, it may



some day bring him in a comfortable annuity. On this occasion he is particularly desirous of "looking pretty," as he smells the scent of gold; he knows that the two nieces of his host are both worth "a plum." So his great blue eyes gaze into the looking-glass, and he still murmurs, as he thinks of his missing cravat, "Shall it be black or shall it be white?"


His thoughts are soon interrupted by the clanging of the first dinner-bell, which warns him that he has but one hour left for dressing. His toilet commences, and we leave him to make the best of it; we leave him with the great necktie question still without an answer.

We are in the luxuriously-furnished drawing-room of the Hall, with its costly oil-paintings, and its cabinets, and pier glasses, and ormolu tables, and its *objets de vertu*, with its grand piano, and its sofas with rich cushions, and chairs with gilded legs. Sit-



ting at the piano is a young lady with a fine clever face, rather hard and proud, perhaps, but still good,—an open brow, and black hair, scornful of chignons, and arranged in the shape of a braided coronet; a dress which is in such good taste that it satisfies the eye at once without haunting the memory; a faultless form, and perfect grace. As she sits before the instrument, her hands brush the keys lightly, and invoke sweet sounds of melody—notes soft and soothing, or loud and solemn—notes which are at all times melancholy—in their very grandeur sad. Her eyes are raised as she plays, and she seems to be pouring out her whole soul in those glorious chords. Proud and almost defiant is the expression on her face; but look into her eyes, and you will find something noble, something beautiful, something good lying in their violet depths. You see before you Miss Edith Ruthven.

Not very far from her stands another



young lady, like her in features, but oh! so different in manner. We have just left 'Il Penseroso,' and now we have before us the very embodiment of all that is light and frivolous. Florence Ruthven, as she stands before the looking-glass, coquettishly arranging her golden hair, so as to allow a curl to fall upon her lovely shoulders, and close to the rose resting in her bosom, is beautiful, *very* beautiful,—a perfect face, with eyes blue as heaven, and a smile playing about her ripe lips as glorious as the sunlight falling on the gates of Paradise. But how can I tell over her features, and class her charms like a catalogue? How can I say that her nose is Grecian, her teeth lustrous as pearls, her ears delicate as rose leaves? Does not the very idea seem desecration? Who has ever written of Eve's beauty, and yet we know that Eve was passing fair? No, rather let me ask you to form your own ideal—my prosy words can never

do justice to the reality. Believe me she was lovely, very lovely—a face which set the hot blood of youth running riot, and even made the feeble pulse of age to beat more quickly; a face beautiful, and yet not quite good. A face lovely, and yet tainted with the clay of earth. Still these thoughts are only faintly suggested to us as we look upon her beauty; thoughts which we half imagine cruel, and yet cannot *quite* shut out. Young, and yet there is a manner about her which is far from heavenly. Like her sister in one trait, she is proud. Edith is too haughty to be quite good, Florence is too proud to be quite bad. And there she stands before the glass, practising her most winning smile, and arranging her hair to the best advantage. Thirsting for the love of man, and yet heartless as a siren—cold as a marble statue. Oh, Circe, thy name is woman!

By-and-by the baronet and Lady Ruthven

enter the room, and then there is small talk about the village and the coming county ball. Sir Ralph is fussy, excited, and touchy, —now contradicting his wife, now snubbing his nieces. He lays down the law as if he were Commons, Lords, and Sovereign rolled into one. He is an old man, and age has robbed him of some of his energy; but we can easily fancy that in youth he must have been violent in his anger and fierce in his passions,—a bad man to offend,—a worse man to injure. Lady Ruthven, seemingly, knows exactly how to irritate him, for every word she utters adds fuel to the raging fire of his wrath.

“My dear,” she says, looking into a glass and arranging her false eyebrows with her fan, “*surely* you are exciting yourself! Now think of the consequences; you remember what dear Dr. Smoothy told you? You *must* not get so angry.”

“Oh, I’m not going to die yet, madam!”

bursts out the baronet; "you'll have to wait many a long year before you dance upon *my* grave!"

"No, my dear," continues Lady Ruthven, harping upon the idea and watching in the glass the effect of a smile upon her eyebrows, "when you *do* die, rest easy; we will bury you with great solemnity. The monument, my dear, shall be newly whitewashed, and we will put nice pretty flower-beds round it; you would like flower-beds, my dear; wouldn't you? so sweetly pretty, you know, roses and lilies and all that. All we shall have to do will be to clear away that pauper's grave, and—"

"Woman!" The baronet is trembling with passion; the last words of his wife seemed to have stuck him like the stab of a knife.

"Woman! Is that the way to address me? before your nieces, too. *Surely* you forget yourself, my dear. I repeat we shall

plant roses (on my word, you don't deserve them), but, of course before we do so, we shall have to clear away that pauper's grave, and—"

"Have you no pity?" It is the trembling voice of a weak old man,—the voice of a man who is not young or strong enough to keep back the tears conjured up by some sad memory of the past.

"Pity! I don't know what you mean. I repeat—"

"You *do* know what he means, aunt! You are cruel—cruel—cruel!" Edith has risen from the piano and stands confronting Lady Ruthven with clenched hands and flashing eyes.

"Edith!"

A turn of the door-handle, and—enter Freddy.

This "scene" is at an end; small-talk and mild flirtation flourish for a few minutes, and then they all go down to

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dinner. All—with one exception. In these days we can eat our food without a death's head before us.

So they leave the skeleton behind them, locked safely in the cupboard.

CHAPTER IV.

RAYMOND'S LETTER.

THE dinner is a thing of the past, and Sir Ralph and our friend Freddy are dawdling over their wine. They have not much to talk about, so they drink their claret in silence. The meal has not been a very great success. The little scene in the drawing-room has not passed off without leaving its effect. Sir Ralph has been gloomily silent; his wife has been drearily vivacious, and Edith has not abandoned her customary reserve. Florence has monopolized nearly all the conversation, but even her chatter

has been just a *little* forced. As for Fred, he has found the whole thing a "bore," and has accordingly neglected to shine to advantage. To tell the truth, the departure of the ladies has been a great relief to him, and he is now revelling in tobacco and coffee.

By-and-by and the door is thrown open, and enter Leopold Lawson. He meets with a hearty greeting from the baronet, which but half compensates for the cool stare of indifference with which Freddy regards him.

"My dear, dear boy!" cries Sir Ralph, wringing his hand with affectionate warmth, "I am so—so glad to see you. Come, find a place by me here. Bring that chair up, and sit down."

Leopold avails himself of the kindly invitation, and then looks askance towards Freddy.

"Oh, Holston!" says the baronet, in re-

ply to the glance; "let me introduce you to my—, I mean to Mr. Lawson."

"No relation, I s'pose," observes Master Fred with a laugh meant to be conciliatory (has not Sir Ralph been "civil" to the new-comer?) "to our useful and dismal friend the steward in the village yonder?"

"You are speaking of my father, Sir," replies Leopold, and the hot blood mounts to his face.

"Oh, indeed; beg pardon, I'm sure," and young Lawson falls sixty degrees in Master Fred's estimation.

"Ill-bred puppy!" thinks Lawson.

"Low-born cad!" murmurs Holston.

And the two men hate each other—from the very moment of their meeting. Will they hate each other in the time to come?

"Now, boys, pass the bottle," cries the baronet cheerily (his spirits have risen since the entrance of his *protégé*); "when I was your age I promise you I would not leave

the table without drinking my fair share of the port."

"That wine's going out of fashion, I assure you, Sir Ralph," says Freddy, languidly helping himself to claret, and moving the decanters an inch towards Lawson. "Fellows never drink it now. Hate it m'self awfully. I know a fellow (rather a sweep) who's up at Magdalene who—"

"Do you mean Magdalene College, Oxford, Sir?" interrupts Lawson sharply, thirsting for a quarrel. "If you do, Sir, allow me to tell you that we have no 'sweeps' at Magdalene."

"*We!*" drawls Freddy. "Whom do you mean by we?"

"Mr. Lawson is a Magdalene man," puts in Sir Ralph, who sees a storm brewing.

"By Jove!"

"Do you see anything strange in the fact, Sir?" asks Leopold quickly.

"Well, upon my soul," replies Freddy,

with his eye-glass to his eye, "as you put it to me so pointedly, I must say it *does* seem confoundedly strange to me."

"Why, Sir?"

"Oh, don't you see, my dear boy?" interrupts Sir Ralph, trying to pour oil on the waters, "it *was* a coincidence, you know. Holston knows a Magdalene man, and you're a Magdalene man."

Now comes an awkward pause. Freddy is playing with his dessert-knife, Leopold sits silent and unappeased, and Sir Ralph glances from one to the other with an expression on his face of anything but satisfaction.

At last the baronet begins to question his *protégé* about his last term at Oxford, and the two converse for a while in an undertone. This topic disposed of, Leopold glances at his watch and stammers out, "Shall we join the ladies?"

Freddy looks sharply up, and catches the

speaker's eye. He thinks, as he leaves the room, "Why can't that low cad mention the girls without blushing?" and as he enters the drawing-room he murmurs, "Egad, I will soon find out."

Leopold is greeted by the three ladies in three different manners. Lady Ruthven gives him her two fingers; Edith touches his hand coldly; and Florence is all smiles and affability. The last-named young lady leads him towards the piano, and while he is finding some music for her, glances towards Freddy stealthily.

"Oho," thinks that worthy young man, "now I understand the meaning of that low cad's blushing."

He is not allowed to think anything else, for he is taken into custody by Lady Ruthven, and carried into a corner. He knows that he is expected to be amusing for the rest of the evening, so, with one eye fixed towards the group at the piano, and with

the other at the service of her ladyship, the entertaining youth submits with a gloomy smile to his destiny.

The baronet is asleep on the sofa ; Edith is sitting near the piano ; Florence is playing ; and Leopold is turning over the leaves of her music.

“ I am *so* glad to see you.”

“ Do you really mean that ?”

“ Why shouldn't I mean it ?” The music here very soft, but sufficiently loud to drown the sounds of the half-whispering voices.

“ Because you must remember our last parting.”

“ Was it worthy of remembrance ?”

“ That is for you to decide.”

“ How can I ?”—music no longer soft but loud and brilliant—“ How can I remember everything ? Why you must think me very clever—much cleverer than I really am. I am such a stupid little thing.”

“ Oh, Florence !”

“What's the matter?”

“How *can* you be so cruel?”

“Cruel!”

“Yes, cruel. You know you treat me like a toy, you humbug me. You know very well what passed at that parting, and yet you ignore it.”

“I've said that I am a stupid little thing. Have pity upon me,—tell me what did pass.”

“Why, you—you know we quarrelled because—”

“Ah, now I remember,”—no longer the brilliant valse, the music is slow and solemn,—“Leopold, I'm sorry you've called it to my recollection. You tried to say words that you never should have spoken,—that you didn't mean.”

“Didn't mean!”

“That I *hope* you didn't mean. Had I not stopped, you would have forgotten for the moment that a barrier lay between us,

that it is unworthy of you to try to break down that barrier. You forgot at that parting that you were the son of the steward of Sir Ralph—that I was Sir Ralph's niece."

"And you answered my half-spoken words?"

"As I should answer them now."

Leopold is leaving the piano.

"What, Mr. Lawson,"—this in a loud voice,—“are you so soon deserting me! At the very moment, too, when I most want your help. See, I've got to the end of the page, and want you to turn over.”

He is back by her side in an instant.

"Did you *really* mean what you said?"

"Mean it!"

No need to ask him *that* question. Look at him as he stands beside her. Look at his face so free from guile, so outspoken, so noble in its very truth. Mean it! why he had staked his life upon her love.

"Poor Leopold!"—the music is now in-

expressibly sweet and sorrowful—"I was right to stop your words. You may think me cruel, but, poor boy, it was only to save you a bitter pang. I am silly and light-headed, and no one can really care for me."

"Oh, Florence, why do you say this?"

"Oh, I mean it. I know my faults. No one really cares for me."

"No one?"

"Well, perhaps Edith does a wee bit. And I dare say Uncle Ralph would be sorry if I were to die. And, yes, now I think of it, perhaps Mr. Holston cares for me a wee wee bit."

This is said with a side glance at Leopold.

"Mr. Holston! What right has Mr. Holston to care for you?"

"Why, my gracious, how angry you look! Why shouldn't he?"

"Why shouldn't he! You drive me to say things that I know will offend you, but you *must* let me speak."

“Well, if I *must*, of course there is no help for it. Well, what is this wonderful secret?”

“I want to take up the thread of what I was saying to you when we last parted,—when you stopped me. I know I am not doing an unworthy thing in speaking to you.”

She looks into his eyes,—his are fine eyes, and she drinks a deep draught of love from them,—and then her more modest eyelashes droop. She is bending towards the piano, as she whispers,—

“What have you to say?”

He is about to answer her, when he is interrupted by the sound of a soft voice.

“Florence, my dear, aunt is going to bed. Come, you must put up your music, and say good-night to Mr. Lawson.”

It is Edith who is speaking.

Florence starts up, and the candles are brought in by Dixon.

Leopold takes his leave of the family.

He bows coldly to Holston (who scarcely nods to him); and, as he puts up the music before bidding Florence good-night, she says,—

“To end the list of improvements, Mr. Lawson, uncle has repainted the rustic bridge. You can't imagine how pretty it looks in the afternoon.”

“Why the afternoon in particular, my dear?”

This from Sir Ralph.

“Oh, I don't know, unless I always see it in the afternoon.” A slight stress on the words. “I have never been there in the morning, so I can't say how it looks.”

A little laughing, a slight pressure from a fair hand, banging of doors, “Good night, Sir,” from the footman, and Leopold has gone.

As Florence and Edith ascend the staircase, Edith says, “Florence, I heard the whole of your conversation with Mr. Lawson.”

“ Well, Edith, what if you did ? ”

“ You are not doing right. ”

“ Oh, I suppose you want to flirt with him yourself, and can't get over his bad taste in preferring me to you ! ”

Edith blushes a deep scarlet, then becomes quite pale. In a moment Florence's arms are round her sister's neck.

“ Oh, Edith, I didn't mean it ! ”

Edith kisses her sister on the forehead, and hurries away.

“ You are not angry with me, Edith ? ”

“ No, Florence dear, I am not angry. ”

* * * * *

Leopold is crossing the park, on his way home to his father's cottage. Suddenly he stops.

“ Why, I have forgotten to give the letter, and my father told me to be sure to deliver it ! ” He turns round and looks towards the Manor-house. “ All the lights are out. Oh, I must bring it over the first thing in

the morning. Let me see that I have it safe."

He feels in all his pockets,—the letter is gone! Where?

Let us return to the hall of the Manor-house, and look over the shoulder of that man standing in the moonlight, under that latticed window. We can't see his face, for his back is towards us, but we can read with him the letter that he holds in his hands.

"MY DARLING (*see how I use the old words*),

"I have come here to see you. As I have found some difficulty in meeting you by day, I have made up my mind to come to you by night. I shall be with you by a quarter-past eleven. This letter is to give you notice.

"Yours for ever and ever,

"GEORGE RAYMOND."

As the man reads this letter the clock of the village-church strikes eleven.

CHAPTER V.

LADY RUTHVEN'S MIRROR.

SOLEMN and still in the old Hall.

Silence reigns around. The moonlight has crept through the stained glass latticed window, and has fallen upon the portrait of a mailed man,—a knight who bore in years long gone by the pennon of the Ruthven race,—who died, oh, centuries ago, uttering in broken accents and with failing breath the Ruthven war-cry; has crept through the stained glass latticed window, and has fallen on the broad oaken staircase, with the wooden lions and their painted shields; has

crept through the stained glass latticed window, and has fallen beneath the great hall clock.

Not quite still.

I have forgotten to tell you of the steady measured tick of the timepiece so loud in the dead of night, of the hard breathing of the man who holds in his tightly-closed hand the crumpled letter, and who looks so earnestly through the casement into the park, now bathed in moonlight and shadow,—in bright white moonlight and deep black shadow.

Silence in the corridors.

In my Lady's room.

She is sitting before her mirror, her form swathed in a loose wrapper, her face a skin-covered skull. Her maid has been dismissed an hour ago, and on her toilet-table lie the rouge pot and the box of cosmetics. She is alone with her confessor,—no priest or man of peace, but a plain sheet of glass

backed with quicksilver, and framed in muslin-covered woodwork, — a confessor which tells her, day by day, that the end is nearer, that upbraids her with her lie,—a confessor which reveals to her the truth, watches her as she patches on the false roses to her cheeks, the dead whiteness to her neck, and when the day is gone, ridicules her poor worn-out features, and paints them with a truth which all the pigments in her dressing-case will never enable her to rival, all the bottled lies of her toilet will never help her to surpass! Looking into the glass, she smiles, as it were, from instinct, and then remembering that the curtain has fallen for the while upon the dreary comedy of her life, her face assumes a look of weariness,—the poor actress has strutted her hour upon the stage, she may rest till the curtain rises once more, and the old, old fooling commences afresh—commences to end like this to-morrow, commences to end

like this the day after to-morrow, commences to end like this to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow, until the hour of death!

A sigh!

The truthful glass has pictured a look of pain which turns the comedy into tragedy, —a look of pain telling of a life's sorrow, a life's despair. Her eyes no longer seek the mirror, but fix their gaze upon her withered hands, burdened with precious gems. In a moment the rings are on the toilet-table, and her thoughts drift far back into the past.

Let her dream, poor fool! Let her think of the day when that withered face was fresh and lovely, when that worldly heart beat with hope and sincerity. Let her remember, poor fool, the meeting with him she almost loved,—with the man a few years later cast off to make room for a wealthy rival. Let her console herself with

the thought that she is rich and honoured, that her husband bears a noble name, that the park yonder is hers, that Stelstead Hall owns her as its mistress. Let her think of all this, but do not let her gaze into the glass before her, for it will tell her that in spite of her wealth, her title, and her acres, she owns a face lined with sorrow, lives a life worthless as Dead-Sea fruit, joyless as that lived by the doomed prisoner listening to the clock-bell which by its tolling summons him to the scaffold and the hangman's rope.

“Strange!” she murmurs. “I feel so low-spirited to-night that I believe I could almost cry!”

Cry, poor fool! See, the rouge lies in the box, the pearl-powder waits for the morning. Cry, poor fool! tears will not stain those withered cheeks, nor rob those dim, dim eyes of their shadowy lustre. Cry, poor fool! none but the mirror can see the

tears, and the mirror is mere glass and metal,—a dumb witness that will never betray you. Oh, yes, cry, poor fool! now in the dead of night, now that the curtain has fallen, for the world is waiting for your laughter—to-morrow!

Brushing away her tears with her rich lace handkerchief, the withered tottering woman takes up a small key, rises from her chair, and approaches the window, throws it open, and looks out into the night. The cool air pours into the room, and the candles flicker on the toilet-table. She gathers the wrapper closer round her, and stands with her arm resting on the catch of the window. Before her is the terrace, with its gravel-walk and marble balustrade, and flower-filled vases. Beyond she can see the park, with its towering trees and tiny streamlet and rustic bridge. All is very still, save the rustling of the brushwood yonder, caused, perhaps (so she thinks), by

a restless rabbit or a startled bird, or the soft breeze playing with the leaves.

She remains for a few seconds at the window, goes to her door, turns the lock hurriedly, and then moves towards an ebony cabinet which stands in another part of the room. Then she takes the key she holds in her hand and opens one of the drawers; the drawer contains a few old letters tied together in a bundle with a piece of faded blue ribbon, a tissue-paper packet, and a small gold locket. She opens the tissue-paper packet, and discovers a lock of jet black hair,—sighs, replaces it, leaves it in the drawer, and returns to her toilet-table, bearing with her the small gold locket.

* * * * *

Listen! Surely a footstep on the gravel-walk!

* * * * *

Lady Ruthven pauses ere she opens the locket and muses.



“I don't know why I should think of him to-night,” she murmurs. “I must be going mad!”

Still she pauses and gazes at the locket. The gold is dim. Still musing, she unconsciously rubs the locket in her hands to brighten it. Deep, deep in thought, she hears nothing.

* * * * *

Listen, Lady Ruthven, oh, listen! Surely another footstep on the gravel-walk!

* * * * *

At last she seems to have made up her mind. She opens the locket and gazes at the picture it contains. A handsome young face, surely; but bad! bad! bad! Dark and determined, black hair, and a cruel mouth. She holds the locket near the flickering candle and looks at it earnestly,—looks at it with all the powers of her soul concentrated in the gaze. She has thought for nought else.

* * * * *

Listen, Lady Ruthven, oh, listen ! Surely another footstep on the gravel-walk !

* * * * *

Then she leans back in her chair before the glass ; the portrait is in her hand, and her eyes are cast down. Deep, deep in thought, thinking of the years gone by,—of the time when that portrait was given her,—of the time when that portrait pictured a living man, not the ghost of a youth misspent and dead,—when she was young, when *he* was young, when the portrait had not learned to lie ! Deep, deep in thought, far away from Stelstead Hall, far away from the Present, far, far away into the shadowy land of the Past !

* * * * *

Listen, Lady Ruthven, oh, listen ! A cautious footstep upon the carpet !

* * * * *

At last, feeling the chilly night air, she



is about to rise. First, though, she takes one last look at the portrait, sighs, and raises her eyes to the mirror!

* * * * *

What is the sight that has made her shiver with fright,—frozen the blood in her veins? What is the sight that would make her shriek her heart out with terror if she had but the courage in the extremity of her fear to utter even a cry?

Why, this.

In the mirror before her, Lady Ruthven sees the original of the locket (oh, so changed!) looking over her shoulder at his own portrait! He gazes for a moment at the painting, and then raises his head. Their eyes meet in the looking-glass. She utters a stifled shriek and starts to her feet.

In a moment a warm hand clasps her wrists, and a savage glance warns her to be silent.

A knock at the door and a voice.

“Lady Ruthven!”

No answer. Another knock at the chamber-door. Louder.

“Lady Ruthven, are you awake? Lady Ruthven!”

With her eyes fixed on a man's face, and in obedience to that man's gesture, Lady Ruthven faintly answers,

“Yes!”

The voice outside continues,

“Is your window safely closed? Have you got the bars up?”

Still with her staring eyes fixed on the man's face, and in obedience to his gesture, Lady Ruthven answers,

“Yes!”

The voice outside seems satisfied. It is heard once again.

“Good-night.”

With a face full of terror, her eyes starting out of her head and fixed with a stony

stare at the figure before her, Lady Ruthven mechanically replies,

“Good-night.”

Retreating footsteps, and all is still!
Alone with *him* at the dead of night!

* * * * *




CHAPTER VI.

FOUND IN THE MOONLIGHT.

LET us follow the moonlight.

Out into the open air, by the terrace, over the trees, among the chimney-pots. See, we dart through a small window, and we are in a mean-looking room. We need have no mystery about the matter,—we are in the chamber of John Dixon, man-servant to Sir Ralph Ruthven, Bart.

The surly fellow is fast asleep; dreaming, perchance, of his many wrongs. Even now he may be bidding adieu to a spectral guest of the “non-tipping” order of philo-



sophy, or declaiming in a visionary servants'-hall a soundless speech against a thousand imaginary grievances. Be this as it may, he is snoring very loudly,—so loudly that it is difficult to catch the sound of the village-clock striking the hour over yonder.

By-and-by, another noise is heard, louder than the throbbing boom of a bell and scarcely as musical. In spite of his heavy sleep, Dixon is half-awakened by this last sound,—it is so loud and sharp and sudden. Our boorish friend opens his heavy eyes and murmurs something about the “cussed poachers,” and drifts away again into the land of Nod.

In five minutes more he is snoring and declaiming his noiseless speech about his imaginary grievances. The clouds move over the moon, and the house is as silent as the grave.

Not now, though. A cautious tread outside the chamber-door, a stealthy knock, and a low voice,—

“John Dixon!”

No reply. Loud snoring. Once more a knock, and once more a voice.

“John Dixon!”

No reply.

The door now slowly opens, and a candle enters. In a moment the moonlight flies away, as if frightened of the man by whom the candle is held. This whimsical notion admitted, and we now feel no surprise. Pale as a ghost, trembling as an aspen, the bearer of the candle is indeed terror-inspiring.

The intruder approaches the bed, takes Dixon by the shoulder, and gently shakes him.

“What I say is this,” murmurs the manservant in his sleep, “one man’s as good as another and better. Yes, Sir Ralph,—directly, Sir Ralph.”

The man by the bedside once more shakes Dixon,—this time with a little greater violence.

“Ow this carriage does shiver one,” Dixon murmurs; until at last a strong push brings back his consciousness, and then he starts up and cries “Murder!”

“What are you about, you fool?” hurriedly exclaims the man by the bedside, placing one of his hands over the servant’s mouth, and glancing round the room with a frightened look. “What d’you mean by it?”

“Beg pardon, Sir Ralph,” says Dixon, his eyes now wide open. “Coming upon me so suddenly, you startled me.”

“Why should you be startled? There’s nothing to be startled at, is there?” asks Sir Ralph, irritably, with a suspicious look at his servant. He continues, however, more mildly, “Just get up and come down to the drawing-room; Lady Ruthven is nervous, and declares that thieves are in the house. I don’t believe it—but, there, make haste down.”

With this, Sir Ralph lights the candle by the bedside, and leaves the room.

As Dixon turns out of bed, he grumbles quietly at Lady Ruthven's "fancies." Stelstead Hall attacked by thieves, indeed! Ten miles from anywhere! The idea is too ridiculous.

In spite, however, of his private opinion about his "missus's" whims, he hurries on his clothes, and in a few minutes is ready to descend to the drawing-room.

Before leaving his chamber, he goes to the washhand-stand, and takes up his large silver turnip-shaped watch.

"Just my luck!" he grumbles; "of course I forgot to wind it up last night. Well, I can get the time from the old clock in the 'all on my road."

The hands of his watch point to half-past ten.

Taking up the timepiece and its key, he leaves the room and makes his descent.

He has grown accustomed during his service in the Ruthven family to the whims of its heads, so that the report that thieves are in the house, gives him very small concern.

But, see, by this time he has arrived in the hall; he waits for a moment while he places the light on a chair, and then walks up to the clock.

The hands stand at one minute past eleven.

“By jingo!” he growls, as he winds up his watch and sets it by the clock, “only been in bed half an hour, and called up to please the fancy of meledy! Oh, it’s a nice family,—a werry nice family!”

He carries his grumbling to the door of the drawing-room, where he leaves it. He knocks, is told to come in, and enters.

Lady Ruthven, swathed in her wrapper, is sitting with her back to the door; opposite is her husband, still trembling with excitement and alarm.

“Ah, Dixon, is that you?” cries the baronet, looking anywhere but at Dixon’s face. “My lady wants you to call up the butler to help you in your search. Just go and wake him, and then return here.”

“One moment, Dixon,” says Lady Ruthven in a cold, steady voice, as the man is leaving the room. “Just let me know the time.”

“Just eleven, meleddy,—I seed the clock as I came in.”

“That will do; return as quickly as possible.”

The man leaves the room, and Sir Ralph Ruthven and his wife are alone.

* * * * *

By-and-by there are footsteps on the flooring of the hall, and the two servants enter.

Before Sir Ralph has had time to speak, Lady Ruthven has said to the butler, “Oh, Storks, by the bye, do you know what the



time is? Just look at the hall-clock and let me know."

Storks, the butler, returns to the hall to obey her ladyship's bidding.

"'Ow cussed particular she is about the time!" murmurs Dixon.

The butler returns, and informs his mistress that it's a quarter-past eleven.

Lady Ruthven considers for a moment, and then says, "I'm sorry to bother you, Storks, but I wish you and Dixon would search the lower part of the house. Sir Ralph will accompany you."

"Couldn't think of allowing Sir Ralph to take so much trouble," replies the courteous butler. "Dixon and I will be quite sufficient, meleddy."

"Oh, never mind," says the baronet, "I'll come."

The little party leave the room, and are gone some time. They return, having found nothing. There is nothing in the kitchen,

and nothing in the pantry, and nothing in the library, and nothing in the dining-room. On all the doors are fixed bars and bolts. Of a verity thieves have not invaded the house.

So says Dixon and so says the butler.

Still Lady Ruthven urges on her fruitless search. Here, there, and everywhere wanders about John,—here, there, and everywhere hurries about the butler. They move about quietly, for Sir Ralph is particularly careful of the household's rest, and implores his servants to be cautious.

The men are weary with exertion, when Lady Ruthven utters a slight cry, and exclaims, "Listen! Did you hear that? You surely heard that?"

"What, meleddy?" asks Dixon.

"The noise of a gun. *You* surely heard it?"—she turns sharply round on the butler as she says this.

"I think I did hear something, meleddy,

but I'm a little hard of hearing," replies the white-headed butler, much too courteous to differ for a moment with his mistress.

When Sir Ralph is questioned, he too has heard the report of firearms. He is very confused and irritable as he answers the questions put to him.

"I'm still nervous," says Lady Ruthven, with a hard look at her husband. "I'm nervous. I'm certain there is mischief brewing. It would be as well to search round the house to see that no one is in hiding."

"Please, your leddyship, there's a many poachers about,—it might be dangerous." It is the butler who says this. The man is civil, but he knows evidently how to be cautious.

"You will oblige me by going round the house. Sir Ralph will accompany you."

"I?" cries the baronet.

“Yes, you,” answers his wife steadily. Their eyes meet, and Sir Ralph follows the man into the hall.

The door is unbarred and opened. As the three men walk into the moonlight, the hands of the clock are pointing to a quarter to twelve.

Out into the cool air of the summer's night. Out into the silvery light of the moon. Under the sky of heaven.

As Sir Ralph passes the portal he seems to shrink into himself. All this time he has been pale and terrified, but now his nervousness increases. It is very quiet, and yet he seems to hear a thousand sounds. At every step he stops and looks hurriedly behind him. You must not be surprised. Remember the baronet is an old man, and old men are easily frightened.

They walk round the house and see nothing. It is beautifully calm. The scene suggests peace and serenaders; charming

for lovers' vows,—the very spot for Romeo and Juliet.

Round and round the house, and they find nothing. At last, when they get near the window of Lady Ruthven's room, they discover footprints on the gravel walk.

It is Dixon who calls attention to the marks. "See," he says, "some one 'as been 'ere. 'E come up to this 'ere window and then walk back again."

Where?

The butler suggests that it would be as well to follow up these footprints; there may yet be time to catch the thief. Indian fashion they trace the marks. Not for very long, for the impressions on the gravel end at the marble balustrade.

Evidently the thief must have made at this point for the park. Nothing would have been easier for him than to have vaulted over the barrier and fallen upon the grass.

“He’s gone, Sir Ralph, I’m afraid,” says the butler, looking over the balustrade towards the park. “By this time he’s safe back to Stelstead.”

“Perhaps ’e might be a-skulking among them bushes,” says Dixon, pointing to a quantity of brushwood growing under the terrace.

“He might,” the butler admits, “but it isn’t very likely.”

They descend, however, and are soon searching among the bushes. Nothing, nothing, nothing! They are about to return, when Dixon stops short and points towards a shrub growing under one of the vases.

“See there,” says he. “Isn’t that something over yonder?”

It is something!

* * * * *

Something that is found with its stony face staring with lifeless eyes towards the sky. Something that is very, very still in



the silvery moonlight. Something with arms that swing loosely as it is carried into the house across the gravel walk it trod so lately.

As it is borne along, the butler says, "Hadn't we better take it into the library, Sir Ralph? We mustn't let meledy see it."

So into the library it is carried and deposited upon a sofa. The face is very calm and bold to the last. A sneer is stamped upon its lips, which seems to jeer at the butler as he throws over its head an anti-macassar. Anything to hide its horrors from the gaze of man.

Then they turn to the table, upon which a light is standing, and Sir Ralph whispers (in the presence of the something they all whisper), "Have you found anything near it, Dixon? any gun or pistol?"

"No, Sir Ralph."

"What, nothing?"

“Only this, Sir Ralph; I found this not far from it.” The man holds up a key, to which is attached a bone label.

Sir Ralph and the butler examine the key and then stare at one another.

There is nothing very extraordinary about the key, but on the label appears the following inscription:—

“GARDEN GATE. JOHN LAWSON.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD HALL CLOCK.

THE house is once more quiet.

Very quiet in the drawing-room, with its chairs standing in the positions in which they were left overnight. A few hours ago Freddy, the languid, much-bored Freddy, was seated over yonder by that sofa, listening wearily to the mild flirtation of the elder Lady Ruthven. Close to the piano is the chair once occupied by Leopold Lawson—the chair he left when he found the music-book for the fair Florence. See the music-stool, and look at the couch from


which Edith rose to interrupt that dangerous *tête-à-tête*,—the *tête-à-tête* which ended so passionately. On the mantelpiece is a cup which a few hours since contained tea. On the floor lies the third volume of a novel, which will be picked up and placed upon the table when the housemaid comes into the room a few hours hence.

Very quiet in Sir Ralph's room. See, he sleeps, worn-out with excitement and fatigue. Look at his face, and you will notice that his dream is no pleasant one. His hands are clasped, and he murmurs, and the low whisper breaks the silence: "Give up the letters, give up the letters! Great God!" A deep silence once more.

But quietest of all (at least so it seems, with that unnaturally still figure stretched stark cold and dead on the sofa) is the library. The moonlight streams down over the top of the shutters through the window, and falls upon a part of the table,—upon

that part of the table which supports the key with its bone label. Very quiet indeed, and yet that stony figure seems to be calling for justice against its murderer. Very quiet, indeed, for we stand in the chamber of death.

Another room. Why, we have been here before. Surely we recognize that wonderful desk, and that toilet-table with its rings and watch chain. H'm, I think we have seen that necktie ere this. Yes, to be sure, we are peeping into Freddy's room. Look, there are his dress-clothes thrown down on the chair beside the door, waiting to be taken into the custody of the valet. By his bedside is a small table, and on the small table is a candle. Near the candle are matches, and beside the matches is a copy of Tupper's 'Proverbial Philosophy.' Freddy is so very wide-awake at all times that it takes a strong narcotic to send him to sleep. Even now he is only dozing. By-



and-by he opens his eyes, lights his candle, and sits up. For a moment the brilliance of the lucifer is too much for him, and he closes his eyelids. Soon, however, he grows accustomed to the light, and stares about him.

“By jingo,” he drawls, “I wonder what woke me.”

He takes up the volume by the bedside, and begins lazily to look over the pages. By-and-by he hears footsteps outside his door and a slight murmur; the footsteps get fainter and the murmur ceases. A moment after and a door closes in the distance.

“Some fellow walking about. Surely the servants must have gone to bed before this. Let's see if our friend Tupper can send me to sleep.”

By the light of the candle he begins reading. Perhaps the ‘Proverbial Philosopher’ is very exciting, or perhaps Freddy is not very sleepy, for the volume has no

effect upon its reader. After awhile, the clock in the hall begins to strike. It has got to six, when Freddy's attention is drawn to it.

"I wonder," he says, "what the deuce the time is. Just my luck; I never can catch a clock at the beginning. One, two, three, four, five. Oh, it must be twelve, I suppose. Wait a moment, though; perhaps I may be able to make sure of it. I know that idiot of a clock at the village church is always five minutes slow."

He sits up in bed and listens. He puts down the book and waits for the hour to strike. He has not to wait long: the sound of a distant bell is heard in the room.

"Ah, there it is," drawls the lazy fellow. "One, two." He stops and looks surprised. "Only two! Why there must be something the matter with the hall-clock. I can swear I heard it strike five, and it had been striking long before I began to listen to it."

We will leave Freddy to wonder, and return to look at the old hall-clock ourselves.

Regard the face. Yes, certainly the hands are pointing to twelve. There is no doubt about that.

Tic tic, tic tic, goes the clock in the solitude, and the minute hands jerks slowly away from the hour. Tic tic, tic tic, and tic tic, and the time goes on. Stelstead clock! that at the village church, pointing at two, indeed! Why, who would doubt such a respectable old time-piece as this, with its steady tic and measured movements? Surely no one in his or her senses. No, it *must* be twelve,—does not this old clock say so?

Shall we leave the hall, reader?—are you satisfied?

Yes; well, let us come. We are going, when we hear a footstep. Oh, it's nothing,—only Freddy, perhaps, tired of Tupper (is

such a thing possible?), seeking another book in the library. By the bye, he had better avoid the library. We know why, —besides, the door is locked.

Stay, it is *not* Freddy.

Look, a draped form is coming this way. It carries no candle, but by the dim light we can just make out the shadowy outline of a woman. A ghost? No, this is no spectre story. It is not a ghost, but a living, moving human being. Wait a moment, and as she passes that window the moonlight will fall upon her face and reveal her features. The figure draws closer and closer, moving noiselessly along, until at last it passes under the stream of light.

Lady Ruthven!

Not walking in her sleep,—no, but bent upon some purpose. See how she looks around her to secure herself from interruption. What wants she here at this hour of the night?

She pauses for a moment, and then approaches the hall-clock. A chair is standing beside the time-piece; Lady Ruthven takes this chair and places it under the clock. Again looking round, she places her foot upon the chair, and now she is close to the face,—the hands are still pointing towards twelve. What wants she here at this hour of the night?

Another look round, and she opens the glass. In a moment the minute-hand leaves its fellow and travels past the hours until it arrives once more at the twelve.

The clock strikes "one."

Again the minute-hand travels on, catches up its fellow, passes quickly on to six, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

The clock strikes "two."

The last sound has scarcely died away ere a shadow falls close by the window, and Lady Ruthven knows that her business has been discovered!

CHAPTER VIII.

FREDDY FINDS A CLUE.

MORNING breaks.

The first to come down is the cook to light the kitchen fire. She throws open the shutters and the sun shines in.

“A beautiful day, of course,” she says; “it always *is* a beautiful day when I’ve got more work than usual. Company dinners, indeed, and for such a wee stuck-up, sin-I-call chap as that Holston! But it’s always the case when I’ve got to stew over the fire more than usual, the sun is sure to come out to help in the stewing.”

In spite of her abuse of the day, however, Cook sniffs at the morning air and leaves the window open. She tidies up the kitchen, and soon is joined by the other servants. Jane and Martha and Mary are soon laughing and busy over the kitchen breakfast.

“Oh, do look here,” says Martha, a fine fresh-coloured country wench, looking out of the window and pointing at some foot-prints on the gravel-walk. “Why, how early Mr. Holston must have been out this morning! Wonders will never end!”

“Oh, that’s not he, you may be sworn,” observes the cook; “he’s much too fine a gentleman to be up before ten.”

“Well, if it ain’t him, who can it be? It wouldn’t be master,” and Martha tosses her head positively.

“I will tell you who it was,” says a voice in rather a hollow tone.

“Law, Dixon, how you frightened us!”



“Frightened you Ah, you’d be frightened if *you’d* passed through what *I* passed through last night, and no mistake. But what brings you up so early? Because *I* couldn’t sleep that’s no reason why *you* shouldn’t.”

“Early!” cries the cook, “why, it’s past eight o’clock!”

“Past eight o’clock!” echoes John, pulling out his big turnip of a time-piece. “’Ow comes it, then, that this ’ere watch points to six?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t be surprised at anything *your* watch did, Mr. John,” says Martha, with another toss of her head. This young person is very fond of throwing back her head, and, as the movement becomes her, why should *we* find fault with it?

“Oh, that’s you, Martha, is it?” retorts John sulkily. “That’s a nice way to talk, I *do* think, with a murdered man lying dead in the house.”

In a moment every one of them is scared and silent. At last Martha summons up courage and whispers, "A murdered man?"

"Yes, a murdered man," he repeats, and tells them the story known already to the reader.

If the plague had broken out in Stelstead, it could not have created greater excitement than the news of Raymond's assassination. In a moment every one is talking in a whisper, and asking questions.

"Yes," concludes John, "we put 'im in the library, and there he lies to this moment."

"Do you know who he is?" asks Martha in a low voice.

"Not I," says John. "Stop, though; now I remember where I saw 'im. I thought I know'd 'is face. 'E rode up to Jas Sampson's as I was a-talking yesterday afternoon. To be sure, and 'e asked the way to Mister Lawson's."

"Mister Lawson's," is echoed by the group.

"Ah, and now that accounts for 'ow 'e got 'old of Mister Lawson's key."

"What key?" And then Dixon has to tell the story of the finding of the key to the garden-gate.

"Who could have done it?" they ask of one another.

Ah, my friends, far cleverer heads than yours will have to decide who was guilty of the foul deed perpetrated over yonder.

The excitement spreads to the dining-room, and you may be sure that very little breakfast is eaten on this particular morning.

Edith sits pale and quiet at the head of the table attending to the tea and coffee. It is her usual place, as Lady Ruthven never makes her appearance till the middle of the day.

"Oh, how dreadful! how very, *very*

dreadful." It is the fourth time that Florence has said this.

Her sister looks towards her with a sorrowful glance. "Poor child," she murmurs, "why should I tell her? No, better not, better not."

"Edy, darling, who *could* have done it?" It is the third time that Florence has said *this*.

And now the door opens and Freddy lounges in, got up in an elaborate morning suit. He greets the ladies, and takes his place at the table; looks at the envelopes of his letters, and thanks Edith for the cup of tea she passes to him.

"Oh, Mr. Holston, have you heard the news?" cries Florence.

"The news!" says Freddy, helping himself to some bread. "No, Miss Florence. Has the 'Times' arrived?"

"Oh, the news isn't in the 'Times.' Oh, it's such a dreadful story."

"A story really! Strange to say, I have a little story to tell myself,—a sort of ghost story."

"Oh, this is worse than a ghost-story! Tell him, Edith, tell him. I can't; it's so very, *very* dreadful!"

Freddy looks from one sister to the other with an expression of half-amused boredom.

"My sister means," said Edith, playing with her knife, "the news about the murder. Haven't you heard, Mr. Holston," she raises her eyes to his, "of the discovery they made last night?"

"A murder!" cried Freddy, surprised out of his *sang froid*. "A murder!"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Holston," and Florence, now that the ice is broken, gives him a history of the tragedy, ending as usual with "Who *could* have done it? You know it's so very, *very* dreadful!"

"Ay," responds Freddy absently, "who could have done it? who could have done it?"

After this, conversation flags a little. The murder is the one absorbing topic; and when *that* is used up, there seems to be nothing left to talk about. At length Edith, as much out of courtesy as out of curiosity, says,—

“By the bye, Mr. Holston, you haven’t told us your ghost-story. We are all impatience to hear it.”

“Yes, Mr. Holston,” from Florence; “*do* tell us.”

“To tell the truth,” replies Freddy, “the murder has quite driven it from my head.”

“Oh, do think of it,” urges Florence.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure, I assure you, but upon my word I’ve quite forgotten it. On my word I have.”

Florence pouts a little, like a disappointed child. Edith looks at Holston. Their eyes meet, and Freddy regards the table-cloth with some uneasiness. Edith thinks, “He *has not* forgotten his story, but

he *has* some good reason for refusing to repeat it."

"By the bye," says Freddy, with careless courtesy, "is your aunt quite well, Miss Ruthven?"

"I've not seen her as yet, but I fear that she will be terribly upset."

"Indeed,—I'm sorry to hear that."

"She happened to be up when the murder was discovered last night."

"Really!"

Again Freddy's eyes seek the table-cloth, and again Edith looks sharply towards him.

"Pardon the strangeness of the question, but do you know whether your aunt is a somnambulist?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Really!"

Again the eyes search the table-cloth, again the sharp look is cast towards Freddy.

"It's too bad to pique our curiosity, Mr. Holston, and then to refuse to gratify it,"

says Florence. "I didn't think you could be so unkind."

"Can assure you it's my disagreeable memory that's to blame,—no fault of mine, I assure you."

"Oh, I'm very angry with you."

"Angry with me!" begins Freddy with a polite laugh.

"Oh, pray do not press Mr. Holston, Florence," interrupts Edith; "very likely Mr. Holston has some very good reason for his forgetfulness."

"Really, really," drawls Freddy, turning very red, "on the contrary I should be delighted if—"

"Come, Florence, I'm sure Mr. Holston will excuse us;" and Edith rises from her chair.

"You must tell me that ghost-story when you remember it, or I shall never, never forgive you," says Florence, as she leaves the room with her sister.

Freddy, who has risen to open the door for the ladies, saunters back to his chair and begins to look at his letters.

“Ah, the usual amount of bills. Why on earth must they send *them* down here! Letter from Charley,—wants me to come to Shoeburyness to see some experiments with his wonderful gun. No, thanks! I know that gun’s peculiarities. Always kills the fellow who lets it off, and touches everything within a thousand yards except the target it’s aimed at! Letter from the governor. ‘My dear Frederick, I wish to speak seriously to you. Your extravagance,’—Oh, that will keep. Ah, I know that writing,—‘Freddy darling, when am I to see you agane? The grate news I’ve got to tell you is that I’m now taken out of the bills until after the runn of the new peece.’ I wish she would spell better. Here’s a lawyer’s writing. ‘Sir, your bill for £350 lies at’—Oh, bother! By jingo, though, I


must do something. Those two girls are rather a good spec. Edith has first choice I should say with Sir Ralph, but she would never do for me. Not my style at all. Florence, now, is much better fun. I think I might make the running with her if it weren't for that snob, young Lawson. Not but that I'm better-looking and—and, hang it all, a gentleman. But the women sometimes are such awful idiots. Who should know *that* better than myself?"

He gives a self-satisfied grin, and helps himself to a second cup of tea, sips it, and continues,—

"I should like to put a spoke in that snob's wheel. I don't see exactly how I can; but then I have a lucky star, and something's sure to turn up."

"Beg your pardon, Sir," says Dixon, who has just entered the room, "I thought you'd finished."

"Oh, never mind me, thank you. You can take away."



The servant begins gathering the things together. Freddy opens a window, sits on the casement, and lights a cigarette. He takes care that none of the smoke shall enter the room, and puffs away.

“Sad thing, this murder, Dixon.”

“Yes, Sir. They’ve taken it down to Ruthven Arms in the village to wait for the inquest.”

“Really. That’s all right. Great bore to have had it here, you know. By the bye, do you know who found—the—the thing?”

“The body, Sir? Yes, Sir. I found the body, Sir.”

“You?”

“Yes; leastways me and the butler. Shot right through the ’eart, Sir, as clean as a whistle.”

“So you found it out,” drawls Freddy, and then he continues, looking at his cigarette. “By the bye, do you remember what time it was when you found it?”

“ Well, Sir, it must 'ave been about 'alf-past eleven. Leastways, when Master called me I know it was just eleven by the 'all-clock.”

“ By the hall-clock ?”

“ Yes, Sir. I set my watch by it; but I was so sleepy I scarcely knew what I was about. Would you believe, Sir, I actually made a mistake of two hours.”

“ Really !”

“ A silence after this, and Master Freddy falls into thought. He seemingly dives deep, very deep, but at length rises to the surface. He puffs at his cigarette and murmurs, “ No business of mine. Strange, though; very strange.” He watches lazily the servant clearing away the breakfast things, and calls after a while,—

“ Dixon.”

“ Yes, Sir.”

“ Where did that affair come off last night ?”

“Over there, Sir; underneath that ‘wawse.’”

“I see. Bring me the papers when they arrive.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Freddy is about to lounge off, when the door is thrown open and Edith rushes in. She says hurriedly,—

“Oh, Dixon, I’ve been looking for you everywhere. You must go down to the village and fetch Dr. Smoothy. My aunt is very ill. You can leave the breakfast things until you come back.”

The man starts off, and Fred, politely interested, asks, with civil sympathy,—

“Nothing serious, I hope, Miss Ruthven?”

“I fear it’s brain fever. My aunt is delirious.”

“Oh, this is very bad. I am *so* sorry. Can I be of any service to you?”

“No, I think not, thank you.”

“Ah, I hope it’s not so bad as you imagine.” He opens the door for her. “I am so sorry.”

When she is gone, he puffs at his cigarette, and murmurs, “Brain fever. Strong excitement generally causes brain fever. But there, it’s no matter of mine.”

He takes up a book and saunters on to the terrace. It is some time before he can muster up courage to approach the spot pointed out to him as the scene of the murder. At length, however, he grows bolder, and looks over the stone coping at the bush beneath. The grass is beaten down, and he can just make out the outline left by the body. By-and-by he vaults over the balustrade and inspects the shrubs more closely.

“I don’t think he could have fallen here,” he says. “It seems to me that he must have been placed here with a purpose. What purpose? Ah, there’s the rub.”

And now he looks even more closely under the bush as a thought strikes him.

“Yes, there’s some blood. Let me see if I can find any more.”

He searches all round the spot until, at a few paces distance, he finds some red spots half-obliterated by the dew.

“I was right,” he murmurs. “The man did not die here. He was carried here after his death.”

Satisfied with his investigations, he strolls away towards the rustic bridge. It is not far from the house, and a few minutes of his very leisurely walk soon bring him to the banks of the stream. He stands on the bridge, peering down into the water.

“So this is Florence Ruthven’s favourite spot. Certainly pretty. Make a capital scene for a sensation drama. Lots of lime light and *real* fishes, that’s the idea. I believe I could write a splendid piece. I

might introduce my ghost story. No, that wouldn't do; the Ruthvens might think it personal. But really, this place is very jolly."

He leaves the bridge, and throws himself full length beneath some bushes on the river's bank; then, shaded by the leaves, he begins reading his novel. After a while he pauses, and exclaims, "What awful bosh this is! On my soul, it *is* such humbug! Who ever heard of a murder occurring among respectable people? Halloa, what am I saying? How about last night?"

He keeps his hand on his book and muses. What with the buzzing of the flies, or the tinkling of a stream running into the river hard by, or the loss of last night's rest, Master Freddy gradually falls asleep. When he wakes, he hears two people conversing. They are evidently on the eve of parting, for one voice says,

"I can't stop now, Leopold. Poor

auntie is very ill, and I must go back to her.”

“But may I not see you this afternoon?” urges a manly voice; “you know you half promised to see me.”

“Is it of such *very* great importance?”

“Oh, Florence, you know what I want to say.”

“Well, if you like, you may be here this afternoon at four. But I won’t promise to come. And now go away, and don’t tease me any more.”

The voices cease, and Freddy is alone again. Our friend never loses his temper, but certainly just now he looks a little angry.

“Curse the cad! I wish I could put a spoke in his wheel!” he cries, and closes his book with a slam.

He very soon regains his calmness, and is about to rise, when a shining object, half hidden in the bushes on the opposite bank,

attracts his attention, He looks steadily towards it, gets up, crosses the bridge, and approaches it. He falls on his knees, makes "a long arm," and secures it.

When he holds it in his hand, he can scarcely regard it without a slight feeling of horror. The shining object has turned out to be a pistol.

He carefully examines it. On the stock is inscribed a name. He reads the inscription, and his face lights up first with surprise and then with pleasure.

"By jingo!" he cries, "nothing could be better. It's just as well I kept my ghost story to myself; the tale would have sounded idiotic. This will indeed help you, my boy! Freddy, sweet fellow, you have got a confounded lot of debts, and any number of acceptances to meet; but you hold a trump card my boy. Go in and win, old man, go in and win!"

He stands for a moment with the pistol

in his hand, and then turns his face towards the house.

“And now,” he says, “I must have a little quiet chat with my friend, Sir Ralph Ruthven!”

CHAPTER IX.

BY THE BRIDGE.

IN the excitement of the murder we have almost forgotten the hopes and fears of our *protégé*, Leopold Lawson. Perhaps there is a little excuse. You see our youthful friend is in love, and people in love are as a rule tedious to the last degree. If we had watched Leopold last night, we should very soon have grown bored of the subject of our inspection. Who cares to look at a fellow staring hard at the moon? Who likes to listen to the semi-poetical murmurings of a youth one-third smiles to two-

thirds sighs? We have most of us done this kind of thing ourselves at one time or another. Those who have not sighed at the moon live in hope, like the aldermen who have not passed the Chair; those who have performed the pleasant operation know that sighing at the moon is all very well when it does not lead to influenza or to a wife, six children, and four hundred a year. So, with your permission, we will pass over the doings of our friend Leopold last night in silence. It may be hinted, however, that he thought very little of the letter intrusted to his care in the cottage, and a very great deal of the *tête-à-tête* he had had with Florence in the drawing-room.

You have guessed ere this that the voices heard by Freddy as he lay stretched full length under the bushes by the rustic bridge belonged to the lad and the maiden. Certainly you are to be complimented upon

your sagacity. But now I think a surprise is in store for you. You may remember that Florence gave Leopold a *rendezvous* for the afternoon. Now for the wonder! The surprise is coming. I'm certain you will never guess what I am going to write next.

Leopold kept the appointment!

Of course, this incident will be considered as grossly unnatural by the critics. For introducing it into my story I shall be accused of "sensationalism," etc., and laughed to scorn; nevertheless, as a truthful chronicler, I must tell you what really took place, in spite of the taunts of my public enemies, and the laughter of my private friends. (By the bye, "public enemies" and "private friends" very often are convertible terms.) Yes, I repeat, Florence gave Leopold a *rendezvous*, and Leopold kept the appointment. With your approbation we will accompany our hero, and

play propriety. We shall not be seen, but that will make very little difference. Lovers in public and private are always the same!

Isn't it ridiculous? Here we are at the rustic bridge, and Leopold has actually arrived before us. He walks up and down, looking impatiently towards the manor-house. Oh, you silly, silly boy, we really are quite ashamed of you! You a hero, indeed! Away with you, impostor; we want a *man*, not a wretched, love-sick sniveller!

Pray don't be too hard upon the poor fellow, gentle, *very* gentle reader. We know that *you* have a soul above, far, far above all this kind of thing. We have heard the story of your luck. We have been told how you were jilted in your early youth, escaping thereby the trammels of a stupid, ridiculous marriage. And we can all of us see what a much better man the

“disappointment” (the word is used conventionally) has made you! Nevertheless, we pray your indulgence. Oh, quintessence of geniality, be a little more kindly.

I admit that Leopold is a little “young” just now. He is “gushing,” and “gush” in the male sex is horrible,—most horrible. But he will improve,—oh, yes, he will improve. He will never become a giant eight feet high with the arms of a Hercules and the tenor voice of a Mario. He will never smoke scented cigarettes, sleep on rose-leaves, kill prize-fighters, chatter Spanish slang, and make love to all his friends’ wives. He will never have the face of an angel, the tastes of a boarding-school miss, and the constitution of the ——! I am not a lady, so of course I cannot paint the portrait of a *perfect* man, but, still, he will improve,—oh, yes, he will improve!

There stands our friend waiting the arrival of his darling. He walks hurriedly

up and down the bridge, pausing every now and then to look anxiously towards the house. You see he is young and really cares for the girl, so let us make some excuses for him. Wait for a while, have patience with him, and he will turn out a very decent sort of fellow. At present he looks more like a maniac than a respectable member of society, but now he is in love, you know, and isn't love, like anger, a short madness, only shorter?

Soon his face lights up with a smile of joy, and Florence's little hand is clasped within his own. The little hand is retained for a moment, and then is coyly withdrawn.

"You see, Leopold, I have kept my promise."

They stand on the bridge, looking down into the stream. Then there's an awkward pause. Leopold is shy (I apologize once more for him), and although he has a thou-

sand things to say, cannot utter a single word. He gives a side-glance and then (like the lady in the song) looks down. She returns the compliment, and it would seem that they never intend to speak, when, as fate will have it, she drops her parasol into the streamlet. In a moment Leopold, to Florence's intense alarm, is over the parapet of the bridge, and hanging on to some ivy. In a second moment the parasol is returned to its owner.

"Oh, thank you. But how silly of you, —you might have fallen into the water and been drowned."

"Oh, no fear of that," says matter-of-fact Leopold; "the water is quite shallow. But," he continues, and the matter-of-fact sinks into the sentimental, "if I had been drowned, who would have cared?"

"Oh, lots of people."

"Who?"

"Why your father, and my uncle, and

my sister," a quick side glance here, "and every one."

"Would *you* have cared?"

She looks at him earnestly, smiles, and murmurs, "You know I would."

The earnest look has given him permission to seize her hand. It now lies unresisting in his grasp.

"Oh, darling, darling Florence, don't drive me mad. Oh, say that you care for me,—*do* say that you care for me!"

The colour is rising to her face, her bosom is panting with emotion, her hand is hot and holds tight the palm within its own. She raises her eyes to his, and gazes at him with a hungry look; he releases her hand, clasps her in his arms, their lips meet, and she kisses him a hungry kiss. He has given her his heart in that embrace, and she has offered him her soul!

A moment thus, and she springs from him and hides her hot flushed face on her

sister's breast. Yes, their meeting is no longer unobserved. Edith, pale, scornful Edith, stands confronting him and shielding her.

“Mr. Lawson! And this is how the steward's son repays the master's liberality!”

“Be kind enough to make your meaning plainer, Miss Ruthven. I am ashamed of nothing that I have ever done.” Steward's son, indeed! but the youth lacks not a noble bearing.

“Make my meaning plainer! Who are you that you should give me orders? *You*, the son of my uncle's servant. You, the recipient of my uncle's charity. Yes, charity, that's the word. Make my meaning plainer! You are impertinent!”

Leopold bows, says not a single word, and is about to withdraw, when Florence cries out, “O Edith, Edith, how can you?”

“Be silent, shameless girl. You—”

Leopold has been voiceless when himself attacked, but now that Edith's wrath falls upon her weeping sister, he interrupts her. He speaks with calmness and sternness, but still retains a perfect courtesy.

“Your pardon, Miss Ruthven. You have insulted me ; it has appeared noble in your eyes thus to treat me ; but for your sister's sake, for your own honour, spare her. Do not force her to receive your reproaches in the presence of the recipient of her uncle's charity !”

A steward's son, and yet a gentleman could not have spoken it more gallantly.

Noble natures are quick to recognize nobility, and even now Edith half regrets her angry words. She says,—

“Leopold Lawson, you are young. I have no wish to be your enemy. Be reasonable. The meanness of your birth is not your fault, but it raises an insurmountable barrier to your marriage with my sister.”

“Why insurmountable?” he cries, and his words, though they sound like an echo of the “Union” at Oxford, are stamped with earnestness. “You say I am young. Have I not health, and hope, and energy? Can I not make a road for myself through life, and find a path to fame and distinction? My birth is mean, you say, and yet I am proud of it,—yes, *proud* of it. No son need blush for his father when that father’s an honest man.”

He is flushed with excitement, and his face contrasts strongly with the white frightened countenance of Jas Samson, who has just joined the group. He turns sharply round and cries,—

“Speak, Jas, what is the matter?”

“Your father —” Samson begins and stops short.

“My father? Great God, dead!”

Jas shakes his head.

“Then what is the matter? For Heaven’s sake, speak out, man!”

“God help you, my poor boy! Your
father has been arrested.”

“Arrested!! On what charge?”

A painful pause and then,

“On the charge of Murder!”

CHAPTER X.

REGINA *versus* LAWSON.

THE curtain has fallen upon the last act of the new piece, and there is a roar through the house of applause and hissing. The applauders "have it," and author, actors, and actresses are called before the curtain to be rewarded for their labours. Soon the critics find their way into the box lobby, and the "auditorium" is left to the orchestra and those of the audience who wish to sit out that dreary tragedy, the "playing-out" farce.

The reader may ask, "Why have we left

Stelstead and its murder to find our way into a West-End Theatre on the first night of a new play?" The question is not a difficult one to answer. We shall shortly have to do with a "serjeant" learned in the law, and here, of all other places, is the spot to discover him. Look at him as he chats with the critics, and laughs at their jokes, or gives them cause to roar at his sallies. Witty and affable and kind-hearted withal, he is about the last man in the world one would expect to find a lawyer. And yet this is he who is so eloquent in the Court, and who draws so many tears from the eyes of sympathizing jurymen. This is he who can win a case, although he may know, at the very moment of his utmost exertion, that he is fighting for a worthless cause,—defending a castle rotten at its foundations. This is he who can "chaff" out of a taciturn and vindictive witness evidence that will, a little later, save an innocent

man's life. This is he who can give such a pathetic appearance to crime that it will pass with twelve intelligent Englishmen as the purest specimen of virtue. This only will he do between the hours of ten and five; the rest of his life is given up to the amusements of the town. And why not? I fancy it must be terribly depressing, that constant attendance at the law-courts. Who likes for ever to see the worst side of human nature,—to be brought day after day and hour after hour face to face with crime and hypocrisy and lying and slandering, and all the other sins that most flesh seems heir to? Does this life make a man a cynic? does it rob him of all belief in perfect good, or even in perfect "respectability"? If Serjeant Porson finds relief in the gas and tinsel of the theatre from the terrible reality of the Central Criminal Court, by all means let him follow his bent. Wait, though, is the Central Criminal Court so

very real? Are those begowned and portly aldermen real or a miserable sham? Are they there to dispense justice, or to furnish food for the laughter of the press and the public? The enthusiasm of the Bar, is *that* real or merely a gold-bought sham? is it caused by the love of right or the affection for fees? The prosy summing-up of the judge, is *that* real or merely a sham? is it a clever explanation of the law, or a shuffling off of responsibility on to the shoulders of a few silly over-praised dolts? The very verdict of the jury, is *that* real justice or merely a stupid sham? is it the well-considered opinion of twelve intelligent, careful, thoughtful men, or the hastily-settled dictum of a dozen miserable idiots, thirsting for their liberty and hungering for their dinner? Far be it from me to answer such questions,—the convicts of Portland know more about the matter than I,—for am I not a silly uninformed kind of person?

To them, then, I refer my readers for a solution to these rather interesting problems.

After the theatre, Serjeant Porson strolled away to Evans's Supper Rooms, there to feast upon kidneys, hot potatoes, harmony, and porter. Late into the night and early into the morning (when the outside public had withdrawn, and the waiters waxed sleepy) did the learned lawyer stay, smoking his cigar and chatting away the time with his intimates. Evans's was deserted in its turn for a literary club, celebrated for its late-hour *on dits* and the "march of intellect." Fresh cigars and billiards, clouds of smoke and *canard* hatching, (the room in which the Serjeant stood was the haunt of the journalists, and was their favourite forcing-ground for producing wonders in the depths of the "gigantic gooseberry" season,) soon carried the hands of the clock towards six. As seven struck, the Serjeant

put on his hat, lighted a manilla, and wended his way towards his chambers in the Temple. Nearly two hours later, and he had "tubbed" and brushed his hair, and swallowed a couple of cups of coffee, and, attended by his clerk, was on his way to the Great Eastern Railway Station. Just in time he caught the five minutes to nine o'clock train to Chelmsford, and, as it began to quit the platform, had managed to fling himself into a first-class carriage, with his brief-bag.

"Porson, my boy, how are you?" It was a young gentleman who said this. A young gentleman with a very neat coat and a very white waistcoat and a very shiny hat. A gentleman very young (between four- and five-and-twenty), very hearty, and very self-possessed.

"If it comes to that, Perks, my baby, how are *you*?"

This was uttered in a half-friendly, half-

contemptuous tone. Marcus Perks was a good young fellow enough, but had the impudence of the dev— h'm, I beg pardon, I mean of the Head Lawyer, or, to be more correct, of the Lawyer with the Tale himself, and required an occasional snubbing. He was the son of a celebrated barrister, and, for his father's sake, his vagaries were regarded with a lenient eye by those who had known Perks, Senior. But, leaving his family out of the question, he was liked for himself,—he was thoroughly straightforward and conscientious; his faults were those of the head, and had nothing whatever to do with the heart.

“Going to Chelmsford?” said Marcus, not a bit abashed by his travelling companion's rebuff.

“Yes,” replied the Serjeant shortly, and the learned man opened his brief-bag, and took out a bundle of papers.

“Come, now,” continued Marcus, “you're

not going to work here. I want to ask you a lot of things, and I have got some splendid regalias."

"Can't attend to you," growled Porson, deep in a brief.

"Oh, yes you can," persisted Marcus; "I want you to tell me how 'The Golden Secret' went at the Athenæum last night."

"Oh, bother! it went beautifully."

"Then why does the 'Telegraph' abuse it?"

"Why? Because the piece is rubbish, to be sure."


"Well, for all that, they needn't be so down upon Miss Milton," said Marcus, from the inside of his paper.

"Down upon Miss Milton!" exclaimed the Serjeant, casting aside his brief, and he held out his hand for the 'Telegraph.' "It's a great shame if they slate *her*. Why, she was the only good thing in the piece!" The worthy lawyer was a great favourite

among the ladies, and regarded himself as their special champion in cases of newspaper criticism. "Now, this is what I call a confounded shame!" cried Porson, after he had read the critique from beginning to end; "a con-founded shame! Pitch into the piece as much as you like, but, hang it all, it's too bad to slate Miss Milton!" Upon this he began a long lecture; subject, "The British Stage, as regards its Actresses." He praised English ladies in general, and Miss Milton in particular; declared they had no equals in France, and distanced the German women by miles—"millions of miles, Sir!" As the Serjeant continued his eloquent discourse, the telegraph-posts flew past by scores, and not a few stations followed their example. In the middle of a long sentence the open brief caught his eye; he stopped short, took it up, and began once more to peruse its contents.

"Do you mind smoke, Serjeant?" asked

Marcus, lighting a cigar.



“Don't bother ; of course I don't—you know that.”

In another moment the carriage was filled with the fumes of tobacco. Porson sniffed, and went on reading, sniffed again, and left off reading.

“Those are good cigars of yours, youngster!”

“I believe you,” cried Marcus, puffing away.

“Where do you get them?”

“Oh, they are privately imported.”

“Just pass your case over here, or I shall complain of you at the next station, for smoking, to the annoyance of your fellow-passengers.”

“I've only got a few, but you may have one if you will tell me that good story about old Knowles, of the Home Circuit.”

“Humbug! I haven't got time. Keep your cigars, and take the consequences!” and the Serjeant continued the study of his

brief, but not for long. The sniffing continued. At last Porson looked over his papers, and said, "You know you know that story by heart."

"I don't," replied Marcus; "I've only heard it once, and then Dick Payne told it me."

"Dick Payne tell *my* stories!" cried the Serjeant indignantly; "why the man must be mad!"

"I should think so," put in Perks; "it didn't make me laugh in the least, and he had to apologize for it, and said it was your story; and he never thought very much of it, only *you* said it was good."

"Not make you laugh!" cried Porson, even more indignantly than before; "why, it's one of the funniest stories in the world. Why, Sir, I've made the Lord Chief Justice *roar* over that story,—yes, *roar*, Sir!"

"Ah! I suppose it's all in the telling," said Marcus, holding out his cigar-case.

“*Of course* it is!” replied the Serjeant, mechanically helping himself to a regalia. “Fancy that fellow Payne telling *my* stories! Why, the man must be mad!”

“Stark staring mad, *I* should say,” said Marcus, giving his travelling companion a light from his cigar.

“Well, I will just tell it you; and you just say if you don’t think it’s the best thing you ever heard in your life.” And Porson put aside his brief for the third time, and began his anecdote. So careful was he to make the most of it, that the telegraph-posts flew past by hundreds this time before he came to the end of it.

When he had quite finished, he was about to take up his brief, when Marcus called out—

“It’s no good reading that now, Serjeant; here we are at Chelmsford!”

“Why, hang it all, so we are;” replied Porson. “Now that comes of your chat-

tering. Here's a heavy murder case, and I haven't even looked at it."

"What's it about, Serjeant?"

"Regina *versus* Lawson. Do you know who's against me?"

"To be sure I do."

"Who?" repeated Porson, with some anxiety.

"Why, I am!" answered Perks, with a broad grin.

"Why, you—you—you,"—the Serjeant's indignation was too great for words—he spluttered out; "you unscrupulous young dog, I do believe you have been hindering my study on purpose."

The answer was a broader grin than before.

"Well," said Porson, as he gave up his ticket to the guard, and his anger turned into mirth, "it won't be a bad story to tell at the mess."

"As *you* tell it,—eh, Serjeant?"

“Ah, my boy, you may get the worst of it yet. It’s very fortunate for me, and very unfortunate for your client, that I’ve only got *you* against me!”

And with this parting shot, Porson stalked out of the station.

* * * * *

Thanks to your counsel’s ingenuity, you have another chance of escape, prisoner Lawson, waiting in the dock to be tried for your life. Make the most of it, man, for the evidence is strong against you, and the people are thirsting for your blood!

CHAPTER XI.

FREDDY WEAVES A ROPE.

THE Court is very full.

The space reserved for the public is occupied chiefly by ladies. The case has caused a very great sensation in the county, and it has been found necessary to issue tickets. Accordingly tickets *have* been issued, and as a natural result the room is crowded with the best blood and the fairest faces in Essex. Carriages fill the yards of the principal inns, and the livery stables are crowded with horses. Outside the Court coachmen and footmen are lounging about in the

laziest manner, and listening with townbred *sangfroid* to the stories of the country bumpkins, who seem to know a very great deal about "Muster Lawson" and his family. The local paper is in great demand, and the London "dailies" are seized and perused with avidity.

Inside the Court just now there is a buzz of admiration, for has not the great Serjeant Porson finished his opening speech? He sits down in his place, and leaves to his Junior the task of examining the witnesses for the prosecution. Said junior is a promising youth of fifty, who occasionally receives a brief from Government in consideration for his valuable contributions to the periodical literature of his country. The youth is not brilliant, but he is safe, and gets up his cases with care and a certain amount of intelligence.

"Call John Dixon."

John Dixon is called. The man wear-

ing the Ruthven livery mounts the witness-box, clears his throat, gives an apologetic glance round at his aristocratic audience, and prepares to answer the questions about to be put to him. Mr. M'Cawley Green (the junior) settles his gown on his shoulders, fastens his glass in his eye, and asks—

“Your name is John Dixon?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You are in the service of Sir Ralph Ruthven?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

And then comes a narrative of the night of the murder, the waking of the witness, and the discovery of the body.

“After you found the body of the deceased, did you return immediately to the Hall?”

“No, my Lord.”

“What did you do?”

“I just looked about the place, to see if I could find anything.”

“Quite so. Did you find anything?”

"Yes, my Lord."

"What?"

"A key."

"Anything peculiar about the key?"

"Yes, it was tied to a bone label."

"Anything written on the bone label?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"What?"

"JOHN LAWSON, GARDEN GATE."

The Junior sits down, and there is a buzz of excitement through the Court. The fair ladies regard the prisoner with fresh interest. Perhaps they picture him to themselves bound in a frame of rope, and adorned with a white nightcap. That last answer was the first "palpable hit" scored to Mr. Calcraft. Before the murmur has died away, Perks is on his legs, and is settling his gown on his shoulders. He clears his throat, and addresses the witness,—

"Now, my man, I want you to be *very* careful. Mind, you are on your oath."

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Oh, you needn't call me that. I am not a judge yet.”

“I beg pardon, Sir.”

“Oh, never mind,—you're only a little premature!”

The cool impertinence of this remark, coupled with the young counsel's good looks, takes the audience by storm, and there is a general laugh. Even Porson grins a surly grin, and the Judge smiles a feeble smile. In fact, to quote the penny-a-liner, there occurs “loud laughter in Court, in which his Lordship most heartily joined.”

When the merriment has subsided, Perks continues,—

“You have mentioned a key with a bone label attached to it. To whom do you suppose it belonged?”

“To Mr. Lawson, my Lord—I mean, Sir.”

There is a little more “laughter,” which

is suppressed quickly by the usher, who has just recovered from a paroxysm of joviality caused by the smile of the Judge to which reference has already been made. The usher is a sort of comic multiplication table. He multiplies the Court's mirth by four. To make it plain, one Judge's faint smile equals four usher's hearty laughs; two Judges' hearty laughs equals eight usher's shrieks of wild merriment, and so on. However, as the Court is just now inclined to be serious, the usher shouts "Silence!" and scowls upon the easily tickled wags with a glance of vigorous indignation. Perks goes on with his cross-examination.

"How do you know the key belonged to the prisoner?"

"Oh, I've see'd it a many a times in 'is 'ands."

"Have you seen it in the daylight?"

"Yes, Sir."

Perks stopped a moment, and looked into

space. When everybody thinks that he purposes sitting down, he asks, in a sleepy tone,—

“How far were you from the key when you saw it in the prisoner’s hands?”

“Quite close. Not only that; ’e’s lent it me before now.”

Dixon says this with triumph, as he imagines that he is ruining his questioner’s case. Perks suddenly wakes up when he hears this answer, and cries sharply,—

“Oh, so the prisoner has lent you his key before now. Now, remember you are on your oath, and be very careful. Will you swear that the prisoner did not lend you that key on the day of the murder?”

“In course I will. I never see’d anything of it that day.”

“Well, the prisoner was in the habit of lending the key?”

“Yes.”

“You can stand down.”

Another little murmur through the Court. The fair faces take less interest in the prisoner. Poor Mr. Calcraft is being ill-used. The wretched man in the dock gives a sigh of relief—the cross-examination of Dixon has turned out a success. The key, with its fatal label, has lost some of its terrors.

“Call Sir Ralph Ruthven.”

The baronet comes tottering into Court. He looks very old and weak, as pale as death, and as feeble as a little child. The audience whisper that Sir Ralph's regard for his agent, and his anxiety for his sick wife, have done their work. He has aged twenty years in as many days.

The baronet is sworn, and corroborates the evidence given by his servant. He describes in a weak quavering voice the commencement of Lady Ruthven's illness, her anxiety, her fear that thieves had broken into the house, his visit to Dixon, and the discovery of the body.

“Stop, Sir Ralph,” cries Perks, as the baronet, evidently much relieved by the conclusion of his evidence, prepares to leave the box; “pardon me, I have a few questions to put to you.”

The witness stops, looks weakly round in search of a protector against his harsh tormentor, and submits to his destiny.

“How long have you known the prisoner?”

“Twenty years.”

“During that time he has acted as your steward?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know,” continues Perks, looking at a slip of paper which has been passed to him by John Lawson, “the prisoner’s antecedents when you engaged him?”

“Yes.”

“That he had been a convict?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you engaged him! Why did

you put so much confidence in him? Why did you engage him?"

"Out of charity." This answer is murmured rather than spoken.

"Oh, indeed! out of charity. I believe you have taken very great interest in his son; have sent the youth up to Oxford. Why have you done this?"

Again the answer, murmured rather than spoken, "Out of charity."

At this point Serjeant Porson starts up to utter a protest.

"My Lord," he cries, "I must remark upon my learned friend's questions; they are quite irrelevant to the case, and out of humanity to the witness (who, we can all see, is in ill-health), I submit it would be proper to dispense with them."

"I think so, too, brother Porson," says the Judge. "What do you wish to prove, Mr. Perks?"

"That the witness had a reason for wishing the prisoner out of the way, my Lord."

“Really, Mr. Perks, I cannot see how that would advance your client’s interests.”

Perks is a young man, and feels himself snubbed; he mutters something about “submitting to his lordship’s decision,” and gazes once more into space. At last he asks, “At what time did you call Dixon?”

“The hall-clock pointed to a quarter to eleven.”

“And you found the body?”

“At a quarter to twelve.”

“What were you doing between those hours?”

“I accompanied my servants in their search for thieves.”

“Had you been to Lawson’s cottage on the day of the murder?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see him?”

“No, he was out. I waited a quarter of an hour, and then continued my walk.”

“Thank you, Sir Ralph; you may stand down.”

With a deep sigh of relief, the baronet avails himself of the permission.

More witnesses. John Phillpott, landlord of the Ruthven Arms, is called, and deposes to the fact of the deceased having dined, on the day of the murder, at his inn; also declares that the deceased asked his way to the prisoner's cottage. In cross-examination he asserts that the deceased did not leave the inn on his way to the park until eleven had struck.

“At the very moment of his leaving, in fact, Sir Ralph, accompanied by the witness Dixon, was searching for the thieves,” puts in Serjeant Porson.

Then the butler is called, deposes to the finding of the body, and to having heard the report of firearms. As he is about to leave the box, Perks stops him and asks—

“Have you been long in Sir Ralph's service?”

“What, Sir?”

The question is repeated in a louder voice, and the witness answers "Yes."

"I fear you are rather deaf."

"What, Sir?"

In a very loud voice, "I fear you are rather deaf."

The butler blushes up to the roots of his hair with indignation and answers angrily, "Never heard better in my life, Sir."

"Are you quite sure you heard the report of firearms?"

"Yes, Sir, and so did Lady Ruthven."

"Without wishing in any way to control the actions of my learned friend, I would submit that the case is a very long one, and that irrelevant questions might conveniently be dispensed with." Porson says this. The Serjeant has not forgotten the scene in the railway carriage, and takes every opportunity of snubbing his opponent.

"I really can scarcely see how the ques-

tions you have just put, Mr. Perks, can advance your client's interest," says the Judge, a second time playing into the hands of Serjeant Porson.

"Why, my Lord, if no one in the house heard the report of the pistol or gun with which the murder was perpetrated, it would seem that the deceased must have been killed previous to Sir Ralph's arrival on the scene of action."

"I don't see that, Mr. Perks," replies the Judge, looking over his notes. "Sir Ralph swears that he called the witness Dixon to search the house at a quarter to eleven. The landlord of the Ruthven Arms gives eleven as the time chosen by the deceased for his moonlight ramble. The murder must have taken place between a quarter past eleven and a quarter before twelve,—in fact, at the time when Sir Ralph was searching the house for thieves. The proof of the butler's deafness strengthens the sup-

position that a discharge of firearms really occurred. If a deaf man recognized the sound of musketry, it would seem probable that such a sound must have been very distinctly heard by those in full enjoyment of all their senses."

After this, three or four labourers are called and depose to the fact of having seen the prisoner shake his fist at the deceased on the evening of the murder. Under the pressure of cross-examination, however, they admit that the prisoner has long been known as a very violent customer. Amidst some laughter, they confess that he has sometimes shaken his fist at themselves, without any evil result accruing from the angry gesture.

The audience by this time are fairly interested. The evidence is very nicely adjusted, leaning, perhaps, on the whole a little in favour of the prisoner's innocence. To make the matter clear, we may open a

debtor and creditor account in the names of—

JOHN LAWSON AND JUSTICE.

Lawson Dr. to Justice.

Key with label bearing prisoner's name.

Shaking of prisoner's fist at deceased.

Justice Dr. to Lawson.

Key often lent by its owner to his acquaintance.

Shaking of prisoner's fist at others than deceased.

"This is my case, my Lord," says Porson.

The counsel for the defence is about to make his address, when there is much talking among the leaders of the prosecution. At length Serjeant Porson once more rises and says, "I beg your Lordship's pardon, but we have forgotten a gentleman who has tendered evidence since the inquiry be-

fore the magistrates. Before my learned friend commences his speech, we would wish to put our witness in the box."

"Really, brother Porson," replies the Judge angrily,—his Lordship is growing hungry, and ill-tempered,—“this is very irregular. You said that you had completed your case.”

“Yes, my Lord,” says the Serjeant blandly; and then continues, sternly, “it is the fault of those who instruct me. I am in their hands.”

“I object to another witness,” cries young Perks.

“Nonsense, Mr. Perks,” rejoins the Judge sharply; “if the calling of another witness furthers the ends of justice, that witness shall be called.”

His Lordship bows to his learned brother, and Porson says,—

“Call Frederick Dalyell Holston.”

Leopold, who is seated near his father's

counsel, looks sharply up. There is a slight murmur in the Court, and then a dead silence. Freddy, dressed as gorgeously as ever, with a flower in his buttonhole and a toothpick between his lips, stands in the witness-box. He looks round, nods to a friend here and there, and then, still with a smile on his face, fixes his eyes on Leopold. In a moment his lips are compressed, and his face is lighted up with triumph. He drops his eyes to the ground, and waits to be questioned.

“Your name is Frederick Dalyell Holston?”

“Quite so.”

“You were staying at Ruthven Park at the time of the murder?”

“Ya’as.”

“You visited the spot of the murder the next morning?”

“Ya’as.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Well, not on the exact spot. But not very far from the terrace there’s a very jolly place, by the side of a streamlet. Just the kind of place to read oneself to sleep, and all that kind of thing.”

“Did you find anything there?”

“Ya’as.”

“What?”

“That a page and a half of Tupper will send you to sleep in five minutes on a hot summer’s afternoon.”

There is a laugh at this reply, which is quickly suppressed by the usher. The Judge, who is growing very irritable, rebukes the witness for his levity. The questioning is continued.

“Did you find anything else?”

“Ya’as.”

“What?”

“When I woke I heard the voices of a young man and a young woman,”—here he fixes his eyes again on Leopold, and regards

him with a cruel smile. "The conversation was so pretty that I thought I must be dreaming, until I caught sight of Tupper, and knew that I was awake, as that respected Philosopher only visits me in my nightmare."

Another laugh. The father bending over the dock in a fever of anxiety; the son, pale with excitement, listening to mocking words and cruel taunts. Freddy once more rebuked (severely this time) for his levity, but cool, and stroking his moustache, his eyes still fixed on Leopold.

"What next happened?"

"I saw something shining in the bushes. I crossed over the streamlet by a rustic bridge, and secured the something."

"What was it?"

"A pistol!"

A murmur in Court,—then a dead silence. Two men are looking into one another's eyes. Hate and revenge, fear and a silent cry for mercy lie in the depths of

those eyes. Not far from them the prisoner stands, with his hands clasped. He is as pale as death, the cold sweat lies thickly on his brow. He has fixed his gaze on the face of the foreman of the jury, and it is dreadful to watch the poor wretch as he strives (oh, *so hard!*) to read his fate, ere his judges have given their never-to-be-cancelled decision.

“Did you notice anything in particular about the pistol?”

“Ya’as, it had been recently discharged.”

“Anything else?”

“Why, ya’as. Rather a good idea,—had a bone label attached to the trigger-guard. Name of owner on it, you know,—no one could steal it.”

“What was the name you read on the label?”

A pause,—a cruel, bitter glance at Leopold,—and then comes the death-dealing reply.

“JOHN LAWSON!”

* * * * *

“I say, my Lord, that I am innocent! I call God to witness, that if you kill me you will be a murderer, not an executioner! As you hope for mercy yourself in the day of judgment, I call upon you to reverse that verdict. I am not a good man,—I have not lived a good life,—I *dare not* die! Save me, my Lord, save me! For the sake of Heaven, don't murder me! By all that I hold sacred, here on the brink of the grave, with my eyes fixed towards the land beyond the shadow of death, and with my lips invoking the vengeance of God if I lie, I swear to you that I am innocent of this foul charge! Yes, my Lord—innocent—innocent—innocent!”

A pause,—a dead silence, and then the dreary monotonous voice of the usher, crying—

“Oyez, oyez, oyez! My Lords the

Queen's Justices, on pain of imprisonment, do strictly charge and command silence to be kept in Court while sentence of death is passing upon the prisoner at the bar. God save the Queen."

CHAPTER XII.

THE LEGACY OF THE LIVING DEAD.

SPRINGFIELD Gaol!

Outside ; a cold, damp morning, with the watery mist rising from the sloshy fields hard by. Outside ; the muddy, country roads, bounded by their green, stunted hedgerows, the miles and miles and miles of flat, flat fields, and yards and yards and yards of mud-built cottages. Outside ; the labourers plodding at their work, the voices of children rushing out of school, the chattering of gossips, and the chirping of birds.

Inside ; the mist has not been able to

creep through the glass and bars. It is clear in the skeleton corridors, with their strongly-built doors—doors opening into cells. It is clear in the large open space between the two rows of iron galleries. It is clear and open everywhere in that strong prison-house. So clear to the warder and so open to the gaoler, and, oh! so close to the prisoner. Inside; noiseless footsteps and mask-covered faces, terrible labour, but oh! so still. They move about—those prison-decked maskers—like brute beasts, always moving, always working, but noiseless as the grave. Outside,—love, and the joyous sound of bright, sunny life; inside,—hate, and the dread silence of the shadow of Death

Let us leave the outside of Springfield Gaol, pass through the porter's lodge, cross the yard before the gaoler's house (defended by tiny cannon and strong iron bars), and enter the prison,—the last home of John

Lawson, convict, awaiting his execution for the crime of murder.

We leave the little hall in the Governor's house, pass through an iron door, and find ourselves in the heart of the gaol. We stand and gaze upon the lofty transepts, with skylights at their arch, upon the iron skeleton galleries—tier under tier; upon the rows and rows of cell-doors; upon the spiral staircases, with their freight of ever-moving felons; upon the stern, silent warders, so watchful and so grave. A painful sight, young and old, halt and lame; there they work, work, work, and walk, walk, walk, while the hands of the clock go round, day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. The loudest noise for hours, the faint tramp of footsteps falling upon asphalt; the only sign of human life for days, a weary sigh!

Let us leave these men to their punishment. Let us pass them by, as they toil in

their hideous masks and their crime-heralding garments. Offenders against society, scoffers at justice, they are unworthy of our pity. Don't let us grow maudlin over their fate; rather let us remember their crimes, of which this prison discipline is the well-merited punishment. Bloodthirsty Dick, the burglar, and Gentleman Jack, the forger, are here. Dick had a *spécialité* for face-smashing, nearly ending, on some occasions, in wilful murder; so, out of consideration for his feelings, the Government have strapped a black, hideous mask over the burglar's features. Surely a kindness. The hideous, expressionless mask is less horrible than the dreadful face it covers; the face beneath the mask is more beautiful than the black, black heart beating so near to it. Surely a kindness; cover his face, and hide him from the light shining down from heaven. "Gentleman Jack" has ruined his hundreds; he has stolen the poor woman's

mite, and robbed the orphan of her little all. Surely he has had enough of gold; cart him away, then, to gaol, and give him a taste of iron! Work him at the crank, and starve him in the cell. Make him water his hammock with his tears. Among those who have known him, it is the fashion to cry,—if you doubt my word, ask the widow and the fatherless! Compassion for such as these! Great Heavens! is there no justice in this world, no punishment hereafter?

But remember the antecedents of Dick and Jack, and keep their crimes well before your eyes, or else your heart will break as you watch these silent maskers, working, oh, so hard, and oh, so hopelessly! How they toil on in the dreadful stillness! the dignity of man swept away; the burden of brute beasts forced upon them!

We are in a cell, cold and bare. Here is the shelf which supports the prisoner's

cup and spoon, his prayer-book and Bible. There are the hooks to which he slings his hammock when the night comes on. Underneath a gasburner is a small reading-desk. High up in the wall there is a strongly-barred window. There is a stool over there, and an iron washhand basin, and a hard wooden bench. By the door of a cell stands a warder, dressed in the prison uniform, with its blue frock coat, black belt, and brass buttons. He is there on guard, for is not his prisoner a condemned convict—one who must never lose the gaze of man until the soul leaves the body to appear before its Creator?

However the warder has allowed the prisoner to keep at the other end of the cell under the window, the while he confers with the third person in the apartment,—a visitor. A contrast! First the wretched man who lives the last hours of an existence that will end in a shameful death.



His face is pale and firm and savage. Not much repentance here, but a dreadful thirst for vengeance. He whispers into the ear of the youth who stands beside him words full of hate and command. This man to die! For pity's sake save him, if it is only to gain time to soften that hard heart, to strive to wash away those unrepented sins that will ere long cry for vengeance before the throne of God. How different is this face from that of the boy so close to him! Leopold, with dead-white cheeks, his hands clenched, and his eyes staring a stony stare, seems unable to utter a sound. He listens like one in some dreadful trance; he hears the sound of his father's voice, and that sound seems to him first like the hissing of a serpent, then like the knell of the bell of death. To complete the picture, gaze at the grave, stern features of the warder, so motionless and so passionless. Look at him, as he stands before the door, typical

of justice,—the servant of fate, the accomplice of the executioner!

“Look here, boy,” the condemned man whispers; “do you know what that sentence means to *you*? It means ruin, rank ruin! To *me* it is merely a little noise and a sharp pain and death, rest-giving death! But to *you* it means blighted hopes and life-lasting disgrace.”

He looks keenly into the eyes of the young man, and continues—

“If you are ambitious, that sentence will bar your progress at every step! If you would become great, that sentence will rob you of all renown! If you love, that sentence will stand between your bride and the altar! It means death to me and ruin to you; do you hear? and yet I am innocent. Innocent, and they are going to string me up like a mad dog, while the real murderer feasts on the fat of the land and makes merry! And still the people

cry there is a God, and prate to me of justice and of mercy!"

And he murmurs to himself, and breaks into fiendish laughter.

Leopold shrinks back. Strange that the son should so fear the father. Strange that the father should be so hard and bitter with his only son.

"Listen, boy," he whispers again; "do you believe that the dead walk? Do you believe that the spirit haunts the earth long after the body has gone to corruption? I do; and feeling this, I swear that I will not rest until you have found my murderer—the man who has thrust me on to the scaffold, the man who hurls my soul to perdition before the appointed time! For your own sake, for my sake, find this man for me, and drag him to justice. Hunt him down, Leopold—hunt him down!"

The youth gazes with dread into his father's face, and whispers hoarsely, "Great God! Do you suspect any one?"

“Suspect!” cries John Lawson, with a shout of savage laughter. “Suspect! Why, I know him! You must hunt him down. Yes, *you* must hunt him down. Rare sport for *you* to hunt him down!”

Again that dreadful laugh, so mirthless, so unlike earthly laughter, so full of reckless despair, so scornful of God’s justice, and, oh, so hopeless of God’s mercy!

Leopold passes his hand across his brow, looks wearily round the cell, and, as his gaze falls upon the condemned man, starts, passes his hand once more across his brow, and motions with his lips rather than whispers the words, “Whom do you suspect?”

His father bends over him and murmurs a name. Leopold falls on his knees, buries his face in his hands, uttering a piteous cry,—

“Oh, my poor, poor Florence!”

“And so you love her, and your love for this frivolous girl would prevent you from

clearing my memory from the black stain of murder. Ah, poor fool! Wait until she has broken your heart! Wait until she casts you off for ever, and laughs at your tears!"

"Silence, father!" A stern voice. Yes, even in the hour of his great, great trouble, Leopold defends the woman he loves with all his heart and soul.

"Mark my words, boy," continues John Lawson; "the time will come when you will utter the name of Florence with loathing. But there, let that pass. All I ask of you is this, when the day comes, as come it will, will you swear to me to clear my memory? I will not be too exacting. Master your sorrow, and quit the country. When you have learnt what it is to be a murderer's son, when you have been shunned and driven from society, come back, change your name, and bring the real murderer to justice. Run him down, boy; step by step

follow him up until you leave him in the hangman's clutches."

"Oh, father, Florence is all goodness, and I do so love her!"

"My poor boy!" and now for the first time the voice of Lawson softens, "dream your dream and wait for the awakening. I will not disturb you. When that awakening does come, swear to do my bidding. Leopold, we have never loved each other as son and father (you will never know the cause of the barrier that has ever existed between us), but we have been fair to one another as man to man. As man to man I ask you to swear to avenge me. I am going to be murdered, boy. Hang,—do you hear me?—hang the coward who sends me to the scaffold. I ask you to keep your word to me when you are quite alone in the world. You understand me, *quite alone.*"

He clasps the young man's hand, and repeats, "When you are quite alone."

Leopold murmurs, "Father, I swear to clear your memory. You have my promise."

"Thanks, boy; and now leave me. There is no hope for me in this world or in the next. You must forgive me, Leopold, before you go, for all my harshness."

"Forgive you, father!"

"Don't call me father now, Leopold; I am too near death to bear with mockery."

"Mockery!"

"What do I say? Yes, Leopold, yes, I am your father. Mind that well; and you will hunt him down, and leave him in the hangman's clutches,—will you not, Leopold?"

He stares about him wildly. His mildness has disappeared, and the savage devil reigns once more supreme. "Mind, you have promised!"

"Oh, my father!"

The last words are spoken. Father and

son will never meet again in this world. A strange parting. Lawson is as cold as stone, and seems relieved when the cell-door clangs back to its place, and shuts out the sight of the retreating figure.

He sits on the prison-bench in deep thought, with his chin resting on his hands; now and again he murmurs to himself, and grinds his teeth.

The day passes slowly; and when the day has passed, the long night commences. One by one the stars creep out, and shine brightly in the heavens; still he sits hugging his knees and murmuring. He jumps up at last, and cries,

“ He *shall* come after me, and Leopold, *his* Leopold, shall hunt him down !”

And then he laughs a bitter, bitter laugh, — a laugh which rings through the corridors of the prison, and finds its echo in the depths of hell !



CHAPTER XIII.

ALONE IN THE WORLD!

“HAVE you a gentleman lodger staying here?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Can I see him?”

“No, Miss, he isn't in. I suppose you know him?”

“Yes,” and a name is mentioned.

“Quite right, Miss! Ah, poor young fellow, he's in sad distress. You know all about his father. Yes, Miss, it's fixed for to-morrow.”

“When do you think he will return?”

“I don't know, Miss, I'm sure. He's at the prison I suppose, Miss.”

“Will you kindly tell him that a young lady called to see him. Say that the young lady will return between five and six, when she hopes to find him at home.”

“Any name, Miss?”

A slight hesitation, and then,

“You can say that Miss Florence called.”

The landlady watches the retreating figure, shakes her head, closes the door, and returns to her household cares and duties. The place is a small cottage on the London Road. In one of the windows appears the legend “Lodgings;” the card has been left there since the last race-meeting. The cottage has a small garden, and is as like its next-door neighbour as one pea is to another.


The landlady bustles about. She is a cheerful woman,—a widow with grey hair and red cheeks, and a comely figure. She

sings softly as she hurries about the kitchen, and arranges this and puts that into its proper place.

By-and-by she leaves the kitchen and knocks at the door of her best parlour, which, with her best bedroom, has been let for years to a meek-mannered, mild-faced clergyman.

“Come in.”

The landlady enters with a curtsy and an apology for her intrusion. The clergyman looks up from the manuscript of the sermon he is writing, and asks her softly “What does she want?” If the truth be told, the good man is the least bit annoyed at the interruption. He is in the middle of a very forcible discourse (our friend, in spite of his mildness, can be, oh, *so* savage when he enters the pulpit), and does not like to have the thread of his thoughts broken, even by the most cheerful and most comely of housekeepers. He accepts his



destiny, sighs, lays down his pen, and waits patiently for the answer to his question.

“ Beg your pardon, Sir, but what will you take for dinner to-morrow ?”

“ Oh, thanks, Mrs. Hardy, I will leave that to you.” He resumes his pen; but as the landlady makes no attempt to leave the room, he regards her once more with a questioning glance.

“ Have you been to the prison to-day, Sir ?”

“ Yes, Mrs. Hardy, I was there this morning.”

“ Did you see him, Sir ?”

“ Yes, Mrs. Hardy, and he has given me permission to sit up with him to-night. He was not very gracious about it, but he gave me permission.”

“ What do you think about him, Sir,—any hope ?”

“ Hope !” echoes the young clergyman; and his pale cheeks blush and his eyes



sparkle with enthusiasm. "Every hope! It is a hard task, for he is very impenitent; but I am certain, with God's blessing, of securing ultimate success. I have gained so much already. He listens now,—listens drearly, and without paying much attention to my poor words, it is true, but still he listens. A week ago he repulsed me, and filled my ears with blasphemy when I spoke to him of his Creator. Have I any hope, Mrs. Hardy? Yes, I have every hope—every hope!"

Mild and meek! Quite so, but brave and proud in the face of the enemy. Mild and meek among children,—in the company of women, but strong and true and daring among bad men—in the midst of the wicked!

"Yes, Mrs. Hardy," the parson continues; "I hope to be able to tell you to-morrow morning that John Lawson died penitent, trusting, at the last, to the great mercy of his Creator."

The landlady echoes the wish, and leaves her lodger once more to the composition of his sermon. By-and-by Leopold returns to the cottage, pale and exhausted. He sits down on the sofa in his room, and rests his face upon his hands. He looks through the window, and watches the stars as they begin to twinkle in the autumn sky. His thoughts wander far away into the past,—to the time when he was at school, and up at college; to the time when the present seemed so pleasant, and the future was so full of hope.

Strange as it may appear, the form of his father seldom mixes in his waking visions. Leopold has never known a parent's love; why, Sir Ralph Ruthven was more like a father to him than the condemned convict up yonder. More like a father! Much more.

The evening closes in, but the young man stirs not. At last there is a knock at the



door, and the landlady enters—softly this time, as if she trod the chamber of death—she gives him the message that the young lady has left for him earlier in the day.

“Did she give any name?” he asks.

“Yes, Sir; she told me that I was to say that Miss Florence had called.”

“Florence!” He springs to his feet, and joins his hands in an ecstasy of thanksgiving. “I knew she would be true to me in my trouble; I knew she would not desert me. Thank God for this; oh, thank God!” The words have scarcely escaped his lips ere a knock at the street-door announces the approach of a visitor. The landlady smiles, and nods her head.

“It’s her, I’ll be bound; I’ll let her in.” Leopold waits impatiently for the sound of footsteps mounting the stairs. At last a handle is turned, the door is thrown open, and a figure glides into the room. “Oh,

Florence, my dear, dear Florence!" he cries, and rushes towards her.

The figure waves him away, and says, in a measured, suffering voice, "I am not Florence."

He starts back, and stands with his hand resting upon the back of a chair. He cries "Edith Ruthven!" and murmurs, "what fresh trouble have I to bear, that my enemy should find me out?"

"I gave the name of Florence," she says bitterly, "because I wished to ensure your reception of my visit. I knew that you would see her, although you might deny yourself to me. Are you listening? Do you hear me?"

"Yes," he murmurs wearily, "I hear you."

"I have come to you, Leopold Lawson, to appeal to your honour—to your manhood. Can you not help me to say what I have to say?"

He is silent; his hand still rests on the back of the chair, and his eyes are cast upon the ground.

She continues: "You are a ruined man, Leopold Lawson. I will not say it is your fault. I do not come here to pain you. But now you must know that a marriage with my sister is doubly impossible. A month ago, when you sought her love, you were presumptuous; but now, were you to ask her to be your wife, you would be unmanly, contemptible, criminal! Are you listening? Do you hear me?"

Again he murmurs wearily, "Yes, I hear you."

"Besides this," she continues,—and although her eyes are swimming in tears, it seems, from her words, that it gives a fierce, agonizing kind of pleasure to wound him,—“besides this, you must know something more. My sister is frivolous, and is easily influenced, and may once again learn to care

for you. Spare her, now that the dream is over,—now, when she no longer loves you?”

He starts, confronts her sternly, and says, in a still, firm voice, which is very passionate, and yet very calm, “You lie!”

The words cut her like the thong of a whip. She turns very pale. She answers nothing, but holds up before his eyes a note which she carries in her hand.

He gazes at the superscription with a frightened look, glances at her sharply, and opens the letter. He reads, and his face becomes stone, the note falls from his hands, and he leans heavily against the wall.

“Did I lie?”

He answers her in a hollow voice, “No,” and then he is quite silent.

She waits for a moment, expecting him to cry out or faint. He does neither, but stands tearless and hopeless before her. At last he says with an effort,—



“What more do you want with me?”

“You have no future in England. Will you promise me to leave the country?”

“It matters nothing to me where I live and die. Yes, I promise you to leave the country. What next?”

“Will you”—she hesitates for the first time during their interview,—“will you not say good-bye to me?”

He pauses a moment, and then slowly stretches forth his hand,—it is as cold as marble. She seizes it eagerly, presses it for a second, and lets it fall.

“Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!”

She has left the room. He rushes to the door, locks it, and falls upon his knees. Then all his manhood leaves him, and he bursts into a passion of tears, crying, “Oh, my lost love! Oh, my lost love! Oh, my lost love! Lost, lost for evermore!”

* * * * *

Daybreak. A lonely road, with miles and miles of flat country scenery, stunted trees, and in the distance the spire of a village church. Dismal and deserted. The footfall of a young man plodding his way along. He turns round for a moment, takes one last look at the land he is leaving behind him, sighs, and plods on again. Another moment, and he has gone.

* * * * *

“Yes, Sir; he must have left early this morning, before I was up. I found the money for his lodging waiting for me on the table.”

“Gone!” the clergyman cries, with a white, scared face, “and I cannot give him Lawson’s message! Merciful Heaven, it is too late!”

End of the Prologue.



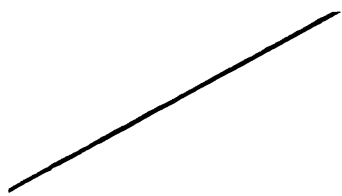
The Story.

BOOK I.—THE MARBLE HEART.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

THE LAND OF GOLD.

A VERY paradise on earth! Yes, indeed, with its cloudless skies, short nights and long days, its gay-plumaged birds and glorious foliage, its grand forests and magnificent waterfalls, emphatically, a very paradise on earth! And yet amidst all this loveliness there lurked a poison, more fatal than the serpent's bite, more certain than the venomed arrow. An old, old poison which had worked the ruin of millions and millions, helping the tyrant in his march to war, aiding the miser in his road to perdi-

tion. A poison as deadly as any used by the Borgias, as ancient as Rome, as fascinating as the siren's singing. There it lay for thousands of years beneath the odorous flowers and the towering trees, buried in the bowels of the earth, hidden from the sunshine, and sheltered from the showers, biding its time—waiting for the hour of its discovery—for that fatal moment when the knowledge of its presence should change “Australia the Happy” into “Australia the Accursed.”

Gold attracted its thousands to the Diggings; thousands composed of ignorant men and needy men and murderous men. They poured over the land like a torrent, swamping the weak Executive before them, and making the country their own. They brought no law with them, save the savage lie, “Might is right.” They believed more in gunpowder and shot than in the truths of the Christian Religion; they had but one God—the

Yellow God, Gold. Their work was but a feverish thirst for wealth. Their play always commenced in rum, generally continued in cards, and sometimes ended in murder. The spot they invaded they found a heaven; long, long before they left it, it had become a hell!

There lived among the wretches to whom I have thus briefly alluded a man of a very different stamp,—a man who had come down to the Diggings shortly after the discovery of gold, and who, since his arrival, had worked steadily and silently at his “find.” He was well-made and muscular, but his face told a tale of much mental suffering. At first he was nicknamed “Stuck-up Dick,”—a home-thrust at his reserve,—but as the diggers learned to know him, this not very complimentary appellation was changed for “White-haired Dick.” Although he seemed little older than five-and-twenty, his hair was perfectly white,—hence the choice of

the second nickname. On the whole, he was tolerably popular with the gang. Although he seldom spoke he was ever willing to do a kindness, and on more than one occasion acted as doctor ;—he was the only man on the spot who possessed a medicine chest. He refused to play at any game of chance, and, in fact, mixed very little with those whom fate had made his companions.

Unhappily, popularity in the Diggings in the year 18— was a particularly uncertain property, and when it became known that “White-haired Dick” had hit upon a lucky “find,” a very strong “feeling” arose against him. Not that Dick had altered very much; he was still reserved, yet ready with his services; but now the diggers found new faults in his character,—he was once more “stuck-up” and “bloated;” he was “a gentleman,”—“What right had he to come upon their ground?” That was the question,—“What right had he?” Dick noticed the signs of

the coming storm, and, like a wise man, made his preparations to decamp. In the meanwhile he was more than ever careful to keep his revolvers in good order and well exposed to public notice. The distrust grew apace. Daily, nay hourly, it increased. He now could scarcely reckon a friend among all the gang. Those who had once rather courted his companionship now shunned him, and passed him by with averted heads. He was an outcast even from this society!

One evening, after a hard day's labour, he had occasion to pass by some dozen diggers who were lying stretched full length on the ground, to get to his tent. As he passed the group, one of the men called out to him, "Hallo, Dick, how goes it with you?"

He stopped at once, so glad was he to hear a friendly voice. He looked at the speaker, and was surprised to find that he had been addressed by a man known among

the lawless band as "The Wolf;" a fellow who until now had been one of his bitterest enemies. He answered civilly enough.

"Pretty tidy, Wolf; as well as I can hope for."

He was about to proceed with a "Good-night," when "The Wolf" continued,—

"Don't cut-up rough, Dick! 'Ere; there's been something wrong between you and the gang this long while. I arn't proud, and I don't mind saying the gang's been wrong. There now."

"I bear none of the gang illwill, Wolf," replied Dick; "and I see no reason why they should bear illwill to me. Since I came to this place I have not injured a soul."

"*We* know that, Dick," cried "The Wolf;" "but your good luck just riled us. But come, there, it's all over now. Here, take a drink to the future."

The man held out a small tin can filled with brandy-and-water. Dick took it, raised

it to his lips, and began to drink. As he did this he looked at the face of "The Wolf." Suddenly he paused; there was something in the taste of the liquid which did not please him; there was something in the expression of "The Wolf" which filled him with alarm. He returned the can.

"Won't you finish it! Why you 'avent drunk 'alf on it!"

"I have taken as much as is good for me."

"Werry likely!" and there was a shout of vulgar laughter. As Dick walked away he heard a clatter. He turned his head round, and found that "The Wolf" had thrown the can and its contents upon the ground. The other men were pointing at him, and whispering together.

He walked on and thought, "What could this mean?" Was it a return of friendliness, or only a trap to lure him into a feeling of false security? The words of "The

Wolf" were well enough ; the laugh might mean nothing.

Diggers always treated any holding back from drinking with the greatest contempt, and his refusal to finish the can of brandy-and-water might well call forth a jeer. Still, he did not like the look of "The Wolf;" there was mischief in the fellow's eyes.

"After so much labour, surely I am not to lose this wealth,—this wealth, which is so little to me, and so much to the dead!"

He walked slowly on, and as he moved he became conscious of a feeling of numbness growing upon him. His thoughts began to wander, and his eyes became heavy.

"This will never do," he murmured. "I *must* think. I *will* not sleep. I HAVE BEEN DRUGGED!"

By this time he had staggered to the entrance of his tent. He crept in, threw down his spade, pick, and iron bowl, and the bag in which he carried his nuggets, and fell

upon his knees beside his medicine-chest. With trembling hands he opened the box and examined the contents.

The laudanum bottle was missing!

He guessed the rest. "The Wolf" and his band evidently purposed attacking him that night. To make the result of the contest doubly sure they had taken the precaution to drug him before carrying out their plan of robbing and murdering him.

"Great Heavens!" he murmured, "what shall I do?"

His only chance of escape lay in his wakefulness. He knew this, and yet with every moment his eyes grew heavier and heavier. He plunged his head into water and walked briskly about, and tried hard to realize the danger of his situation. He stopped at nearly every step, and his thoughts began to wander. Exerting his will to the utmost, he repeated to himself over and over again, "They are coming to kill me;

keep awake ! They are coming to kill me ; keep awake !”

He looked at his revolvers, and found them loaded and in good order. In his walk he always managed to keep his face turned towards the entrance of the tent, so that he might be prepared for any sudden attack. Almost dead with the exertion of battling with the drugged brandy, he still persevered in his precautions. The time passed slowly, and for awhile he remained undisturbed. His weariness increased, and just as he was falling off to sleep and rocking on his feet, he pulled himself together with a jerk, and found a man confronting him.

It was “The Wolf!”

The sight gave him back half his senses. He pointed his revolver at the intruder, and cried out in an excited tone, “What do you want here, Wolf? If you come here to murder me, you will lose your time.

You see I'm well armed, and hold half-a-dozen lives in each of these revolvers. You won't kill *me*, for I hold a charmed life, and can't die,—no, not until I have fulfilled a vow made to the dead.

“The Wolf” and the men who stood looking into the tent shrank back as Dick uttered these words. If you want to find superstition in its fullest development, descend among the cut-throats, and your wish will be gratified. Dick, seeing the effect he had produced, continued :—

“If you have come here to rob me, again I tell you, you will lose your time. I defy you to touch these wretched nuggets,”—he kicked the bag contemptuously with his foot. “I defy you, and tell you that you dare not take one of them. They're not mine. They have been dug from the earth to serve a noble cause. They have been collected with toil and labour, to be used in a work of mercy and justice. I tell you

they do not belong to me. Shall I tell you to whom they *do* belong? Yes, I will. They belong to Him Whom you revile in your drink, and scoff at in your mirth. They belong to Him Whom, in spite of your brave words, you all of you fear, and to Whom, on your deathbeds, you will shriek for mercy! Those nuggets belong to God. They will be used in His service, AND I DEFY YOU TO TOUCH THEM!"

Exhausted by these last words, and no longer able to resist the effects of the laudanum, Dick murmured a few unintelligible sounds, fell to the earth, and fainted away.

CHAPTER II.

STELSTEAD AGAIN.

QUICK as thought our scene has changed once more to England. Far, far away from the gold-fields of Australia, back to the land of golden grain. Away from the lawless country where every man is his own judge to the very *sanctum sanctorum* of dignified respectability. Back again among the white chokers and black clothes, to the favourite home of the Bible and everything that is good. Back again to that land where a church is the pathway to heaven, and where a fashionable bonnet is the pass-

port to church. Back again to that holy country where the bad is ignored and not amended; where ignorance is denied and not overcome; where crime is so refined that it is difficult to distinguish it from virtue, where vice is so genteel that it seems the very counterpart of good. Back again to England, boastful England,—land of blunders and follies, nonsense and humbug, and all that is stupid and obstinate and brutal.

Since the opening of our story Stelstead has seen little change, although the village is now five years older. It is true that the execution of Lawson caused some little excitement by which the proprietors of the Chelmsford papers benefited slightly. Bunce, the tailor, and Steel, the butcher, became subscribers to the local journal on the strength of the exclusive report of the murderer's trial, and there the matter ended. Again, the doings at the Hall were

not allowed to pass unheeded. The departure of Miss Edith and her aunt, Lady Ruthven, for a distant land, was canvassed again and again. It was more than whispered that the brain fever had bereft her ladyship of her senses, and that she was now little better than a madwoman. But when we have said this we have said everything. A village in England, as a rule, is the most conservative spot in the world. As we see it to-day so it was yesterday, as we see it to-day so it will be to-morrow. There will be, perhaps, a new generation in the shops, and an old generation in the churchyard, but as to the place itself, it will remain the same. Stelstead was no exception to the rule; it woke up for a moment about the Raymond murder, and then fell asleep again to dream, and to doze, until some fresh excitement should disturb its slumber.

It was early morning, and Jas Samson

sat in his shop hard at work. The top part of the door was open, admitting to the room the scent of the sweet-smelling lilac and the joyful chirping of the birds. The old man has changed but little since we last saw him. Perhaps the stoop in his shoulders is now more remarkable, and his hair is a shade whiter; this admitted, he is the same Jas Samson who sat in that shop just five years ago—the very same.

Jas hummed a song as he did his cobbling. "Ah!" said he, taking up a pair of heavy ploughboy's boots, "you're a nice article! You look highly intellectual! If all of our people were no better than *you*, a republic would be a curse instead of a blessing! *I* know what *you* do; you trample upon your wife and spend every penny you earn at the beer-shop! Get away with you! no amount of repairs will make *you* good for anything!" He threw the boots from him and took up a pair of pretty little

shoes. "Ah, *you* look very nice, but I don't trust you. Want fresh soling, eh? I should just think you did! Soulless and heartless, heartless and soulless, you are just the pair of shoes to lead a man to despair and death. Phew! in spite of your pretty bows you smell of blood!"

He raised them above his head, and was just about to throw them from him when he saw their owner standing at the doorway and looking into the shop. He let his arm fall, and continued his work in silence.

"Well, Jas," said the new-comer, a beautiful girl, with sparkling blue eyes, golden hair, and a perfect figure, "what have my poor shoes done that you should so abuse them?"

"Your *shoes*, Miss Florence, have done nothing," replied the old man, shortly.

"Come, Jas," cried Florence, opening the door and entering, "I want to have a long talk with you. You have not been your-



self for months—years. Come, it won't be breakfast-time up at the Hall for the next quarter of an hour; so I shall bore you with my company until I hear the first bell rung."

The old man rose as the girl came in and seated herself on a broken-down chair without a back to it, and stood respectfully watching her. She carried some flowers in her hands with which she made a feint of playing.

"Don't get up for me, Jas. Why, you've known me since I was a child no higher than your knee. Surely you're not going to make a stranger of me now."

The old man gave a little bow and resumed his seat. He sat down and took up his work again.

She looked at him and began playing with her flowers. Suddenly she stopped and asked abruptly,—

"Jas, what have I done?"

“What have you done, Miss Florence? Nothing that I know of, except you have honoured this poor house by staying in it.”

“This isn’t kind, Jas,” said Florence, still playing with her flowers. “You know how lonely I am now that my sister has left me, and how few friends I have. I *did* think I might count upon you for one, but it seems I am mistaken.”

“I am a cobbler, Miss,” replied Samson from his work. “I do not presume above my station. My friends are among my own class.”

“By that you mean to say you are not a friend of mine?” said Florence, tearing a flower to pieces, and throwing it to the ground.

Jas was silent.

“And yet,” continued Florence after a pause, “at one time I’m sure I was a prime favourite of yours. There was nothing you

wouldn't do for me then. I counted you as one of my firmest friends."

"I've lost all friends since then, Miss."

Florence blushed up to the roots of her hair, and cried hurriedly,

"I know what you mean, Jas. Ah, if you only knew how wretched I've been since he left. I feel that I've been so wicked,—so very wicked. I was cruel,—very cruel."

"It *was* cruel, Miss. The poor lad wanted comfort and love, and you drove him away. He wouldn't have left, I know, if you had shown him the smallest mercy. You *didn't* show him the smallest mercy, and so you drove him away. It's not for the likes of me to talk to the likes of you, but you have forced the subject on me, and I'm obliged to drop the cobbler in the man. What I say mayn't sound respectful, but you may be sure it's true."

"But I am *so* sorry, Jas," said Florence,

in a pleading tone; "you're going to forgive me, I know. You're not going to be angry with me for ever. Remember what friends we used to be. Come now, don't look so cross, but forgive me. I'm very lonely up at the old Hall yonder, and I should like to feel that I have still a friend in the world."

"Ah, Miss Florence! the forgiveness of such a stupid old ignoramus as me won't do much good. But there, such as it is, you have it."

"Thanks, Jas, thanks!" cried Florence, her face lighting up with pleasure; "and now we are friends again, I shall come and look in here often. I can't stop any longer this morning, though, as I can hear the breakfast-bell ringing. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Miss," said Jas rising and opening the door. As Florence walked rapidly away, throwing the flowers she carried behind her in thoughtless *abandon*,

the old man murmured, "Play with the roses, young lady, while you have them; tread them underfoot; but beware of the thorns,—beware of the thorns!"

He returned to his usual seat in the shop, and once more resumed his work.

Florence made the best of her way to the Hall. She passed by the Lodge, over the rustic bridge across the lawn, and entered the house by the dining-room window. The table was laid for breakfast. She rang the bell for the urn, and, on its arrival, quickly made the tea. Before sitting down again the post-bag attracted her attention; she rushed up to it, opened it, and found two letters. One was addressed to her, and the other to her uncle. They both were written on foreign paper, and bore the Australian postmark. She placed Sir Ralph's letter beside one of the breakfast plates, and then turned to her own note. She removed the envelope, looked at the handwriting, and

then pressed the letter fervently to her lips. She read as follows:—

“ WESTMINSTER HOUSE, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA,

“ *1st, January, 18—,*

“ MY OWN DARLING SISTER,—You see by the address at the top of this letter that we have arrived safe and sound at our destination. Our voyage was not very eventful. The people on board were not the kind of persons I should have naturally chosen as my friends, so I was very reserved, and kept myself to myself. At first this conduct was resented, but after a while the crowd grew accustomed to my ‘haughtiness,’ and left me to my own devices. My letter to Uncle Ralph will have told you all the news about poor auntie. I fear she will never quite recover the shock of that fearful night when the murder was committed. She is now quite well, as far as her body is concerned (the voyage, as it

was expected, worked wonders), but her mind is painfully affected. We propose staying here for a couple of months, and then think of returning. So, if no unforeseen difficulty arises between this and then, I shall be with my darling Florence at dear old Stelstead before the end of the summer.

“Of course you want to know all about Melbourne. Well the place itself is suggestive of a suburb of London banished to Ventnor for misconduct. As for the people, they are colonists,—very proud of their adopted country, and particularly fond of a title. If poor auntie were well enough to bear the fatigue, she would be *fêted* everywhere upon the strength of ‘her Ladyship.’ Leaving this little foible out of the case, the people are a kindhearted, hospitable race. They do not disgrace the mother-country.

“We have heroes among us, too! The lion of the hour is a very successful digger, —one who was known a year ago as ‘White-

haired Dick,' but who now writes upon his visiting-cards, 'Mr. Richard Harwood.' I understand he is a most accomplished gentleman, speaks several languages, and knows the use of the globes! There are many stories told about him. Among the rest, that he was once attacked by a band of robbers up at the Diggings, and by his eloquence was able to drive the ruffians away. Since he has been in Melbourne he has embarked in a great many desperate speculations, and, strange to say, has been wonderfully successful in every one of them. He is a fatalist, and believes that until he has fulfilled some vow (made in years gone by), he will never lose. He is now a millionaire, and although his hair is perfectly white, can be little more than five-and-twenty. I have not yet seen him, but am sure to meet him at one of the Government balls.

"The end of my note-paper warns me

that I must write no longer. Give my love to Mrs. Butler at the Cottage, tell her that I hope her rheumatism is better. I hope you haven't forgotten to give Sarah Clayton her monthly packet of tea. Kiss 'Beauty'—my poor old pony—for me, and believe me to be,

“Your most loving, affectionate sister,

“EDITH RUTHVEN.”

Just as Florence had finished reading her sister's letter, the door was thrown open, and Sir Ralph, leaning on a stick, tottered in.

“Good morning, my dear,” he cried in a shrill, thin voice; “I am late—late. Ah, I am not so strong as I used to be. Not so strong.”

She rose from her chair, threw her arms round him, and kissed him.

“See, uncle dear!” she said; “here's a letter from Edith; won't you read it?”

“A letter from Edith,” he echoed, taking the packet listlessly in his hand. “To be sure. A letter from Edith. From Edith across the seas.”

“Shall I open it?” asked Florence, stretching forward her hand.

“Yes, my dear, you’d better read it,” said the baronet, passing over the letter to her; “I am not so strong as I was. Not so strong.”

He fell back in his chair in a listening attitude. His face was turned from the light, and his eyes were fixed on vacancy. Florence opened her sister’s letter, and read as follows:—

“MY DEAR UNCLE RALPH,—As we all expected, the sea voyage has done poor auntie a world of good. She has quite recovered her strength of body. I wish I could give as good account of her mind. My dear uncle, you must prepare yourself

to bear a very dreadful shock. I am afraid poor auntie will never quite recover her senses."

Florence paused for a moment, and looked towards her uncle. The eyes of Sir Ralph were still fixed on vacancy—he had not changed his position. The girl continued reading.

"From what the doctors tell me, I fear that that dreadful night on which the murder was committed was fatal to my aunt's peace of mind. As a rule she is perfectly calm and tractable, but occasionally a violent fit comes upon her, and then I watch by her bedside all the night through. Her delusion seems to consist in the notion that she is taking part in some awful tragedy. The other night I was sitting beside her, when she sprang up in bed and seized me by the arm, and cried, 'You have killed him,—I can see it in your eyes. You

have killed him ; call them up, and keep by them. Go! I will see to the clock.' Then she imitated with her voice the striking of a clock. First twelve, then one, then two. Here she paused for a moment, and"—

At this point Florence stopped reading, and looked towards the baronet.


She ran towards him with a cry,—Sir Ralph had fainted.



CHAPTER III.

A COLONIAL BALL.

BRILLIANT lights, flashing jewels, and soft music. It is high festival at Melbourne, for the Governor is giving a ball. Society is invited, and society in Australia is uncommonly like society in London. The truly British love of titles exists at the Antipodes as it does in England; the same petty jealousies, the same contemptible ambitions. Brown envies Smith, and Jones is ever on the watch to supplant Robinson. Over here we deal with Dukes and Marquises; over there a Baronet is a deity, and



a Knight a man of the highest rank. Over here we have a real Queen and numerous nobles well known to Debrett; over there they have a sham Court and a make-believe aristocracy, and in both countries we find an equal amount of flunkeyism. It would be a matter of no difficulty to preach a sermon with this ball as a text; but the lecture would be stale. Has not Thackeray—noble-minded, kind-hearted Thackeray—held up the mirror to society, and shown snobbism its own revolting features? I bow before the Great Master; let me not murmur in weak accents about society,—a theme which has given exercise to his grand voice over and over again. Enough to say, the *élite* of the Colony have been invited to this ball, and the *élite* of the Colony have graciously accepted the welcome invitation.

A group of young men were standing at one of the entrances. About the majority

of them nothing was particularly noticeable; they belonged to that large class the "Colonial exquisite," and by their general appearance conjured up a recollection in the mind of the newly-arrived Englishman of London—of days long gone by; they were certainly a little late, that is to say, calculating by Greenwich time. In the midst of these out-of-date "swells" stood a young man very unlike his companions. Although scrupulously well dressed, there was not a *souçon* of the *petit-maitre* about him. He was tall and well made, handsome blue eyes, a golden beard and moustache, and perfectly white hair.

"So this is your last night in Melbourne, Harwood," said one of the exquisites languidly.

"I'm afraid so," said he of the white hair with a smile; "it will be very painful tearing myself away from you. I know how I shall be missed."

“ Well, I don't know that,” said another of the exquisites with a laugh, “ you are so confoundedly lucky. Since you have been at Melbourne you have carried everything before you. From first to last you must have made nearly half a million of money.”

“ Yes,” Harwood assented, “ I have done pretty well. I'm sorry to take the money from the Colony, but it is wanted in England.”

There was a laugh at this, but the speaker looked so very grave that his companions stopped short in their merriment, and thought they *must* have made a mistake in the joke.

“ I shall come and see you in London,” said a third exquisite. “ You know I belong to a London family. We all lived there until my grandfather came over here.”

“ At the public expense !” put in another of the group in a whisper.

At this moment Harwood was marched

off to be introduced to some fair lady, and left the exquisites still chattering.

“Mr. Richard Harwood—Miss Ruthven.”

Edith started slightly as she heard the name, and saw the figure before her. Harwood, on the contrary, was perfectly cool and collected.

“Are you engaged for the next round, Miss Ruthven?” he asked.

She held up her card, and he wrote unconsciously something opposite to the next vacant valse. With a slight gesture of impatience he carefully erased what he had written, and wrote above the erasure his own name. This done, he returned the card to Edith with a bow, and walked away.

“How the old times come back upon me with the old faces!” he murmured, as he strolled among the dancers.

The moment he had gone Edith looked eagerly at her card. She found a name

pencilled out, and the words "RICHARD HARWOOD." The signature was sloping from left to right, instead of from right to left.

"Richard Harwood is an assumed name," said Edith to herself. "I have seen that man's face somewhere. Where?"

By-and-by the band commenced playing one of Strauss's delightful vales, and Harwood came to claim his partner. Edith stood up, gave her fan and bouquet to the Colonial dowager who chaperoned her, and in another moment was floating through the room to the sweet sad sounds of the dance-music.

"I am glad we have been introduced," said Richard. "Do you know that we are going to travel home together?"

"What, are you a passenger in the 'Queen of the West'?"

"Yes."

Her eyes brightened. What was this

strange infatuation,—why did she thrill as she listened to his voice,—why was this dreamy valse such exquisite pleasure?

“You are going home with your aunt?”

“Yes; she is a very great invalid.”

By this time they had stopped dancing, and were walking into one of the conservatories attached to the drawing-rooms. She sat down on a couch and he stood before her. As they talked to one another the sound of the sad dance-music was faintly heard.

“Have we not met before?” said Edith with her eyes on the ground, and her hand carelessly playing with a branch of creeper which fell over the back of the couch.

“I think not,” said Harwood calmly, as he added with cold politeness, “I am sure I could never have forgotten an interview with you, had I ever enjoyed so great an honour.”

“And yet I am sure I know your face,— I have seen it many times before,—it is very familiar to me. So familiar that I cannot speak to you as a stranger.”

“I congratulate myself upon my face,” replied Harwood, with a ceremonious bow.

“Why are you returning to England? I suppose to enjoy yourself. Melbourne is certainly *triste*.”

“No, it is not because I find Melbourne *triste* that I leave Australia,” he replied with a calm smile; he added with a grave voice, and with his eyes raised to heaven, “No, I go back to England to set right a wrong,—to perform an act of justice and mercy.”

Here the waltz music sounded inexpressibly sweet and solemn.

“You are young to undertake so serious a mission.”

“I am young in years, Miss Ruthven, but my face will tell you how I have suffered.”



She looked up timidly at him and said in a low voice,

“I have seen you before; I know you are no stranger to me; I don't want to fear you, I want to make you my friend. Tell me, has that mission anything to do with me or mine?”

Harwood was silent for a moment. Edith held her breath, and looked earnestly into his eyes. After a pause the young man answered,

“As my mission is to punish the guilty, it surely can have nothing to do with the Ruthven family.”

“He will not answer me!” she murmured.

“Shall we go back into the drawing-room?” he said, offering his arm.

She stood up and said to him slowly,

“You look like an honest man; answer me the question I am going to put you truly.”

He bowed, and waited listening to her words.

“Tell me,” she said, and her voice trembled as it was heard through the sad sounds of Strauss’s valse, “are we friends?”

He looked at her earnest face for a moment, and then once more offering her his arm said, “Shall we join the dancers?”

They passed out of the conservatory.

* * * * *

Edith had returned from the ball, and was standing at the bedside of her aunt. She had thrown off her opera-cloak, and her fan and bouquet had fallen to the ground. As she stood beside her, Lady Ruthven began to murmur in her sleep.


“It will out!” cried the old woman, tossing her arms about. “Murder will out! Come what may, do what you will, murder will out! The avenger will be working, working, working, and growing nearer, nearer, nearer, until it becomes as clear as

noonday. Murder will out, I say! Murder will out! Keep near them, Ralph, while I alter the clock. Round go the hands. One o'clock. Round go the hands. Two o'clock. Good God, he sees me. Murder will out!"

CHAPTER IV.

HAUNTED BY THE DEAD.

ALL was bustle on board the 'Queen of the West.' After lying idle for a month, the ship had awakened to life and importance. The Captain, who had for weeks since existed in Melbourne, and moved in a circle respectable but not particularly distinguished, had now become *the* man of the hour. His officers shared with him the greatness which had fallen to his lot, and shone about him with a reflected light. The very seamen obeying the orders of their superiors, and doing wonders with



the aid of ropes, suddenly emerged from obscurity and became for the nonce people of mark. The passengers were taking leave of their friends or "settling down" comfortably into their cabins. Fussy people were getting into every one's way, and nervous people were trying to avoid the censure of those in authority by smiling and apologizing to everything and everybody, and in fact, as I have already hinted, all was bustle and confusion.

Early in the day, Lady Ruthven, attended by her niece and her maid, had been safely conveyed to her cabin, and had immediately retired to rest. In Melbourne the name of the particular malady with which her Ladyship was afflicted had been kept a secret—all that had been ascertained was this, Lady Ruthven was a great invalid and would see no company. When Edith arrived on board the 'Queen of the West,' she had asked for an interview with the


doctor of the ship, which had been immediately granted her.

“My aunt,” she said, “is suffering from intense nervous excitement. A very marked improvement has taken place within the last two months, and I wish if possible, to keep the cause of her seclusion a secret. I do not want every idle tongue to gossip of Lady Ruthven’s madness. Do you understand me?”

“Perfectly,” replied the doctor, with a bow. “I see no reason why the secret should not be kept. I suppose you have perfect control over the patient?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, I foresee no difficulty in the matter. You must be careful not to allow her Ladyship to leave her cabin without an attendant, and I would advise you to choose the dinner-hour for the time of exercise. Between four and six, Lady Ruthven might walk the deck without



subjecting herself to much idle curiosity. Shall I see my patient at once?"

Edith bowed, and led the way to her aunt's cabin. She opened the door and went in, leaving the doctor in the saloon.

"Auntie, dear," she said, "I have brought your new doctor to see you. May I introduce him to you?"

"I cannot see him just at present," replied Lady Ruthven, in a loud tone of voice, and then she added in a harsh whisper, which became more distinct with every word to the doctor waiting in the saloon, "What can you be doing, Edith? How can I see any one in this state? Give me my dressing-case and my looking-glass. Why, see I am as pale as a ghost! Here, give it me quick. You are jealous of me, Edith; you know you are, and want me to look as pale as a ghost, and that's why you won't give me my dressing-case. It's cruel of you and undutiful of you, and it's breaking my heart!"

With this the old woman began moaning and crying and murmuring. Edith returned to the doctor.


“Did you hear what my aunt said?” she asked with a flushed face.

“Yes, my dear young lady,” replied the doctor in an undertone, “I heard every word. You must humour her;” and then he added, with the intention of being overheard in the cabin, “I am sorry that Lady Ruthven is not well enough to see me. I will do myself the honour of calling upon her later in the day, when I trust she will be able to receive my visit.”

With this the doctor moved away, and Edith re-entered the cabin. Without uttering a word, she lifted up the dressing-case and gave it to her aunt. Lady Ruthven left off whimpering at once, and with feverish haste began to unbuckle the straps. In a few minutes more the old woman was busily engaged in plastering her withered

cheeks with *blanc de perle* and rouge! Ugh! the scene is a hideous one; let us leave it.

The steamer had moved from her moorings, and was now fairly on her way to Galle, *en route* for England. Among the passengers were a few sorrowful faces—faces that mourned absent friends and lost relatives; but on the whole, the ‘Queen of the West’ carried a cargo of happiness. The ship was bound towards “home,”—dear old, white-cliffed Albion, and there was not a man aboard of her who did not carry a light heart as the vision of his much-abused but well-beloved fatherland rose before him. We Britons are never tired of finding fault with our native country, but when we leave our land behind us the affection we have for England, which lies at all times deeply rooted in our hearts, bursts into blossom, and bears good fruit. In Pall Mall the biped representative of the national lion



has iced water for blood, and seems to live by slowly-moving machinery ; but send that biped representative away from his native clubs and brandies and sodas to foreign shores, and you will find him a true English gentleman, with a heart of gold and a will of iron, proud of his country, and ready, if needs be, to die in her defence.

Richard Harwood was seated on the deck, watching the wavelets as they were left behind in the wake of the swiftly gliding ship. The sea was very calm, and the sun was setting over the waters in glorious majesty,—ocean and sky were both tinged with hues as magnificent as they, alas! were quickly fading. Richard, with his head resting on his hand, gazed upon the lovely sight with eyes that seemed to find a sadness in the beauties of the scene.

Richard sighed deeply as he watched the sunset.

“ A beautiful scene, Mr. Harwood,” said

a soft voice beside him. He turned his head, and found that it was Edith Ruthven who had spoken. He rose, and seeming not to notice a hand stretched towards him, raised his hat and bowed. He offered her his chair, and stood leaning on the bulwarks.

“ You see,” she said with a forced smile, “ we enemies are to meet again.”

“ Oh, we mustn't call ourselves enemies,” he replied with a little laugh ; “ it sounds so dreadful, does it not ? Oh, there are no such things as enemies now-a-days. We live in a polite age,—hate went out with defensive armour.”

“ Are you sure of that ?” she asked with an earnest, piercing glance.

“ So people tell me,” he replied, with his eyes averted from her face, “ and I *must* believe them, for do we not live in an age of love and sincerity ?”

He said this with great bitterness, and his

voice changed so much that it seemed to belong to quite another man,—to a man mad with rage and grief,—to a man possessed by a devil.

“No,” he added quite calmly, “I cannot believe in enemies. You see people are so good; we have no crimes or wrongs in the nineteenth century. Occasionally we hang a man as a sort of tonic. If he is guilty, very well; if he is innocent, the lesson to the people is just the same. Justice surely may sometimes make a little mistake without laying herself open to censure?”

Edith glanced at him with an expression of sorrow and pain upon her face. She said,

“I have heard that you are a fatalist, Mr. Harwood.”

“Oh, you have been told some of the tales about me at Melbourne,” he replied with a smile. “I give you my word, Miss Ruthven, that my biographers absurdly

flatter in every respect the subject of their histories, who, truth to tell, is a very plain, ordinary kind of creature. However, I *am* a fatalist."

"And yet you see that sunset?" she said, stretching forth her arm towards the West.

"Pardon me, Miss Ruthven," he answered quickly, "I am a fatalist—not an atheist. I am a fatalist, because I firmly believe in the justice of Heaven. Without that belief I might indeed become an atheist."

"And if I have heard what is true, you believe yourself to be the instrument of Heaven?"

He smiled and replied, "You have been correctly informed."

"Come, Mr. Harwood," said Edith, "I cannot treat you as a stranger. I cannot recollect when and where I saw your face last; but when I did see it I know I looked upon it without anger. I am sure we were friends."

Harwood bowed slightly in acknowledgment of her words.

“You have been wronged, and you intend to usurp Heaven’s prerogative of justice. Will you let me give you a little advice? Will you let me tell you what I would do were I in your place?”

“You are very kind,” he said with a smile, and then he thought to himself, “If she did but know! *She* must needs give advice to *me*! If she did but know!”

“I can see from your face,” she began, “that you have been deeply wronged.”

He bowed slightly in confirmation of her words, and waited for her to proceed.

“Perhaps you have been disinherited unfairly?”

He bowed again.

“Have I finished?” she asked; “have I summed up all your wrongs?”

He shook his head.

“Perhaps you have been deprived of your father’s love by treachery?”



He bowed his head in answer to her question.

“Is that all?”

“No.”

“Perhaps,” and now she spoke with hesitation, and stopped at nearly every word, “you have been deceived by one—by one who should never have deceived you?”

His head was quite turned away from her as, in a voice which trembled a little, he answered, “Yes.”

“And do you know what my advice will be?”

“Perhaps,” said he, “to forget.”

“No,” she answered quickly, “to forgive.”

“Forgive!” he echoed, turning round upon her, and speaking with a hard, bitter voice; “you speak, Miss Ruthven, like a woman,—a true, constant woman! Your sex never requires pardon, so you counsel ‘forgive.’ Oh, yes, forgive injustice,—in-

justice which has caused years of misery and despair! After you have worked—oh, so hard, so patiently—for justice! When God has prospered your schemes, preserved your health, and put the sword of justice in your hands, throw down the weapon, give up the purpose of your labour and your life, and whine out in feeble accents ‘forgive.’ This may do for women, Miss Ruthven, but I am a man. I don’t want vengeance, but I will have justice. To gain justice I will go through fire and water, and will follow my enemy by day and by night. I am rich and young and strong, and now that Heaven has put it in my power to commence the chase, I will not leave my man until I have hunted him down.”

At this moment Lady Ruthven’s maid came up on deck and whispered something to Edith, who immediately rose and prepared to descend to the cabin.

“I am sorry for you,” she said to Richard.

“Indeed, I am very sorry for you. The wound must be very deep if you cannot forgive!”

His answer was a sad smile.

She left him still leaning against the bulwarks of the vessel, gazing upon the wavelets as they danced and glistened in the silvery moonlight. The sun had set, and now the moon reigned in the heavens.

The night grew apace, and all was silent on board of the ‘Queen of the West’ save the grumbling of the screw and the sound of the bell marking the hours of the watch. In Lady Ruthven’s cabin the maid had fallen asleep beside her mistress’s berth, and the lamp hung swinging silently from the ceiling. Although the maid was asleep, the mistress was wide awake. Lady Ruthven sat up in bed, staring at her sleeping attendant. After awhile she began to move. She rose and proceeded to dress herself. She walked about the cabin on tiptoe, stop-

ping every now and then to look at the face of her maid. When she was quite dressed, she stooped down in front of her looking-glass, holding in one hand a rouge-pot, in the other a puff.

She paused for a moment.

“I never looked better in my life,” she murmured, plastering a little more colour on to her withered cheeks. “If he won’t come to see me, I must go to see him. Perhaps he may be on deck.”

Covering her head with a shawl, the old woman opened the cabin door carefully, crossed the saloon, and made the best of her way up to the deck.

The moon was shining brightly as she appeared. She drew the shawl closer about her, and looked round the ship. Standing near the bulwark, gazing into the sea, was the figure of a man.

“That must be him,” murmured the old woman to herself with a chuckle; “he won’t visit me, ha! ha! so I visit him.”

She approached the figure on tiptoe; when she got close up to him, she touched him with her hand and said,—

“Doctor, doctor, I’m well enough to see you now. You wouldn’t visit me, so I’ve come to visit you.”

The figure turned round and revealed the face of a young man with perfectly white hair.

Lady Ruthven started back with a scream of fright, and in spite of her rouge turned ghastly pale. She trembled and shrieked out—

“What are you doing here? Why have you come to torture me? It’s all over, I tell you, and can’t be undone. I thought you were dead! You *are* dead! The dead have come to haunt me, as they haunted me before. Go away! For God’s sake go away!”

By this time Edith and the attendant had made their appearance upon deck, and

in a few minutes more Lady Ruthven was carried moaning to her cabin. Edith was once more left alone with Richard—she addressed him.

“Mr. Harwood, I depend upon your honour, as a gentleman, to keep this scene a secret.” He bowed. She continued, “After what has occurred, it is scarcely necessary to tell you that my aunt is mad!”

* * * * *

Before Edith went to sleep that night, she murmured, “Where have I seen his face? I must find out. I WILL FIND OUT!”

* * * * *


As the hours slowly passed in Lady Ruthven’s cabin, the old woman sat up jabbering to herself in her rouge. Every now and then she put up her hands to her eyes, as if trying to shut out some horrible sight; whenever she repeated this movement, she cried in a weak and trembling voice, “I

thought he was dead! He is dead, and the dead have come to haunt me! Oh, why can't I bury it? Why can't I bury it? The dead have come to haunt me. Murder will out! Murder will out! Ah me!"

CHAPTER V.

EDITH MAKES A DISCOVERY.

ON the second morning of the voyage, the passengers began to reveal themselves in their real characters. Men who had been pompous in Australia now began to be pompous on board ship; girls who had spent their lives in flirtation in Melbourne now looked about for victims among the young men with berths taken in the 'Queen of the West.' Richard Harwood, the young millionaire, would have been in great request, had he not preferred to confine himself nearly all day to his own cabin. Dis-



appointed of their prey, the flirts turned their attention to several officers returning invalided to England,—men with faces of bronze and hearts of iron; men who would have listened to the siren's singing and applauded her, from afar off; nay more, had any of them played the piano they would have accompanied her; again, let it be well understood, from afar off! These men of the world were perfectly safe in the hands of the flirts. Love-making to these gallant creatures was a matter of every-day occurrence,—a part of their profession. So the time passed very merrily. The sea was as smooth as glass, and the good ship was making an excellent voyage.

Since the night on which the painful scene with Lady Ruthven had occurred, Edith had appeared on deck but occasionally. Naturally sensitive, she shrank back from subjecting herself to the eagle glances of the curious and scandalous.

Always quiet and retiring, on board the 'Queen of the West' she was more than ever reserved. The young people of the ship found a nickname for her; they called her "The Sphinx." Richard Harwood was also distinguished by a second title; they called *him* "The Man with the Marble Heart." On board ship you must find some employment,—if you don't flirt you must read, if you don't read you must work. Edith neither flirted, read, nor worked, but yet she found plenty of occupation. Ever since the night upon which she had determined to discover something more of Harwood's antecedents, she had patiently watched him, with the hope of one day gratifying her curiosity at his expense. At first she used to seek his company, and attempt by her conversation to draw from his lips the story of his life. This course failed utterly; Richard saw the trap prepared for him, and avoided it. Always

coldly polite, he became singularly reserved when Edith Ruthven touched upon the past. Woman-like, Edith having failed in one plan, set herself patiently to work to form another. Richard's tongue was on its guard. Richard's habits must be observed. If he would not reveal the truth, the truth must be wrung from him by other means. It was at this time that Edith began to watch Harwood; after a while she discovered two things:—

1st. That Richard kept some valuable documents in his desk.

2nd. That Richard wore the key of his desk on his watch-chain.

She determined, by hook or by crook, that she would see the inside of the desk. To attain her object, she knew she must first secure the key attached to the watch-chain. Knowing this, the great dream of her life became the possession of the watch-chain. It *must* be obtained. How was she

to get it? That was the question. She argued to herself, too, "What right has he to hide his life from me? If it is honest, it will bear the light of day."

Now I do not intend to defend Edith. It was wrong, very wrong, of her to wish to steal a man's secret by such unlawful means. But then you must remember that curiosity is a failing *almost* peculiar to females, that Edith had nothing to do on board ship, and that when the "Gentleman in Black" finds idle hands he,—but, there, you know the rest. More than this, I have a theory about women; I am rather a rude man, and don't believe them *all* to be angels.

The desire to find out the real name of Richard Harwood (she was convinced that the title he bore was only assumed) had now become an absolute mania with Edith. She thought of nothing else, dreamed of nothing else. She used frequently to meet Richard in the saloon,—as a rule she passed

him by in silence, but on one occasion she stopped and addressed him.

“Mr. Harwood,” she said, “can you kindly give me the time? My watch has stopped.”

“Oh, certainly,” he replied, taking out his watch, “it wants twenty minutes to eleven.”

“Thanks very much,—isn’t your watch a repeater?”

“Yes. It is not very useful, but the sound of the little bell is pretty;” he touched a spring, and the watch struck the hour and the two quarters.

“Very pretty indeed. Thanks very much. I think you said twenty minutes to eleven.”

“Yes,” he replied, replacing his watch in his waistcoat pocket, “twenty minutes to eleven.”

She bowed to him and passed on. He saw nothing more of her that day, but on the following morning he again met her in the saloon. She stopped him once more.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Harwood,” she said with her eyes cast on the ground, and a faint blush mantling in her cheek; “but can you do me a favour?”

“Only too delighted, Miss Ruthven,” he replied.

“After you had shown me your watch yesterday,” she spoke with hesitation and difficulty, “I mentioned the matter before my aunt. You know what an invalid’s fancy is—unreasonable, unaccountable. If my aunt had taken a fancy to hear the bell of your watch, would you—”

“Oh!” cried Richard, interrupting her, “is that all? I wish you had put it in my power to do you a greater favour, Miss Ruthven.”

He took off his watch and chain, and gave them to her. She stretched out her hand, and received them with a blush of shame.

“I trust you will allow your aunt to re-

tain the watch as long as she pleases," said Richard with a smile, as he turned away. "On board ship we require no measure of time. The minutes are only fast in comparison with the hours; the hours would be the slowest things in the world were it not for the days, which are decidedly slower."

As Richard disappeared, Edith made a movement as if she would call him back. When he had gone, she looked at the watch-chain. Yes, there was the key to the desk. She hesitated for a moment, and then walked towards Harwood's cabin.

She paused at the door for a second.

"What right has he to hide his life from the sight of men? He said he was not my friend, too. It is my duty to learn his secret. Yes, it is my duty to learn it. I *will* know who he is."

She stayed no longer at the door, but boldly entered the cabin. In a moment she

had found the desk and had opened it. It contained a number of documents and letters. At the very bottom of the box she found an envelope marked "THE PAST;"—the envelope was very old and discoloured. She paused for a moment with the paper in her hand. Then her curiosity was too much for her virtue, and she broke the seal. She started and turned pale as she read the letter the envelope contained. It was a note written in a girl's handwriting. She put her hand to her head and tried to think. As she stood thus she heard these words spoken sternly by a manly voice,—

"Miss Ruthven, what right have you to be here?"

She turned round sharply, and cried,—

"At last I know you! Ah, now I understand your threats. You would ruin the Ruthvens! You would raze the family honour to the very dust! *You* would have done this—*you*! But it is too late, Richard

Harwood, I know your secret. With a breath I can destroy you. When the time comes I have but to raise my arm to tear off your mask, and reveal to a scoffing world the features of Leopold Lawson, the son of Raymond's mur——”


He seized her by the wrist and whispered fiercely in her ear,—

“ Silence !”


CHAPTER VI.

'PLOT AND PASSION.'

THE 'Queen of the West' had given over her cargo of passengers to another of the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamers, and lay quiet in the harbour, waiting the hour of departure for her return journey to Melbourne. The 'Punjaub' had taken a living freight on board, and was steaming away *en route* for Aden, the Red Sea, and Suez. Life was very much the same to Edith Ruthven aboard the 'Punjaub' as it had been in the saloon of the 'Queen of the West.' Certainly there were new faces,




but these faces belonged to a familiar type. There were military men with brown complexions, and Anglo-Indians with no livers, and "grass widows" with plenty of admirers, and anxious mothers with young families of sickly children; and people lived and slept, and ate their meals and flirted, as of old. Perhaps there was a little more jealousy on board, now that the Anglo-Indians had been joined to the Australian happy family. Mrs. Smith, whose husband was a Commissioner, would not talk to Mrs. Brown, the wife of the well-known Indigo Merchant. The Civil Service snubbed the Military, and the soldiers treated with contempt the members of the Uncovenanted Service. In fact, the Anglo-Indians showed by their conduct how well "snobbism" flourishes when transplanted from England to the tropics. I cannot find it in my heart to be very severe with these poor creatures, because I can see afar off in



London a Nemesis waiting to punish them. I know perfectly well that they will land at Dover after the "sad two hours" expecting to find in England a second mother. I can see them coming up to town by the "boat express," full of the pleasantest anticipations. I can picture to myself their delight at recognizing Charing Cross, and their joy at hailing Pall Mall. Would that my vision could stop here. But no: they carry something more than the clothes and goods packed away in their heavy black leathern, white-lettered boxes; they hold in their heart of hearts a sense of their own vast importance. And this sense of their own vast importance is the rock upon which the bark of their happiness will be thrown, and rent to pieces. In a couple of months I see these poor creatures wretched and disappointed. In a word, they will be "snubbed." Great, *very* great people at Calcutta, they will dwindle into small, *aw-*

fully small people in London. The mighty M'Naughton, the Collector of Dashstaroj-poor, will become (at Bayswater) that "fellow in the yellow face, with the black moustache and disagreeable expression." Mrs. Tremenheere, the wife of the Commanding Officer of the Upper Koosh District, will be known (in South Kensington) as "that savage-looking woman in the magenta *moiré*." The men will belong to no clubs except to that abode of bliss in St. James's Square, where they will meet men fully as disappointed as themselves; and the men's "ladies" will take a long, long time before they creep into the "Society" where their claims will be at once laughed at and disallowed. This being the case, I cannot, as I have written above, find the heart to abuse them. I may hint, however, that a little jealousy and heartburning on board a Peninsular and Oriental steamer must be particularly pleasant to the snubbed ones of Anglo-Indian Society,

After Richard Harwood's discovery of Edith Ruthven's presence in his cabin, his conduct towards the young lady exhibited a slight change. He was still coldly and scrupulously polite, but with his politeness was mixed a *souçon* of contempt. By mutual consent they ignored the scene in which the mask had dropped from Harwood's features, and had revealed in their stead the face of Leopold Lawson. Richard and Edith still spoke when they met, but now the manner of the man suggested, at least to her, pity and sorrow; it seemed to lack respect. The proud blood of the Ruthvens coursing through Edith's veins fired at this pity, and the girl was hurt to the quick. Day after day her indignation grew greater. "How dare he," she murmured to herself a hundred times, "how dare he pity me? How dare he forget that he is a murderer's son?" And still Richard was coldly polite, but his politeness seemed to lack that "some-



thing" for which Edith had looked so long and so eagerly. At length she could bear it no longer. She determined upon speaking to him. Another long day had passed, and dinner was over. The passengers had left the tables in the Saloon, and were lounging on the poop. Edith stood by the side of the vessel, looking down into the sea. Not very far from her she heard the voice of Richard, engaged in lively conversation with some young lieutenants who had been invalided home to England. It may be mentioned here that these young men had tried a long course of brandy to cure their various ailments, and that the medicine in question had not turned out a brilliant success.

"You must, old man," cried one of these budding warriors; "there's not a fellow on board who could play the part, and you're just the man for us."

"It's too absurd, Thompson," replied

Harwood with a smile. "I'm no actor, and it's one of the principal characters in the piece."

"Well, you'll be no worse than Streater as Fouché,—he's *awfully* bad!" This in a whisper; then aloud again, "Do say yes, that's a sweet fellow. I do so want to play Cevennes; and if we can't get you to act, we must give the whole thing up."

"Well, well; I will think about it. Can you let me have a book?"

At this moment Edith turned her head round, and, catching Harwood's eye, beckoned to him to approach her. Taking the play-book from Thompson's hands, he immediately left the group.

"Mr. Harwood, would you kindly bring my chair over here?"

He left her, to comply with her request, and she walked away out of earshot of the party of young officers. He placed the chair by her side, and was on the point of leaving her.

"Are you in such a desperate hurry?" she asked, forcing a smile.

"I am at your service, Miss Ruthven," he replied, "now and at all times."

She looked down for a moment, and then raised her eyes timidly to his face. He was looking composedly across the deck at some sailors altering the position of one of the sails. The moment had arrived for Edith to wither Richard with her indignation; and yet here was she, the avenger, afraid and excited and nervous, and there he stood, the culprit, calm, and (to tell the truth) with an expression of slight "boredom" stamped upon his countenance. The sight of his listless face restored to Edith the sense of the outrage her feelings had received.

"Mr. Harwood," she said angrily.

He turned round, with a glance of surprise. She went on excitedly.

"Mr. Harwood, I am all alone on this


vessel. You know the secret of my aunt's illness, and you have taken advantage of my loneliness to insult me."

"Insult you, Miss Ruthven!" exclaimed Richard with a slight start. Even his "*sang froid*" disappeared before so sudden and unexpected an attack.

"You know you insult me," she continued, with a heightened colour, "every hour of the day. Whenever I meet you, wherever I see you, it is always the same. Is it brave or manly to treat me thus?"

"Really, Miss Ruthven," said Richard very gravely, "I cannot imagine how this strange fancy has entered your head. I hold myself guiltless of any intentional rudeness. Of what do you accuse me? Tell me when and where I have erred, and you shall receive my instant apology."

"When and where?" she echoed; "why your very look insults me,—the tone of your voice heaps indignity upon me. Since the night I found out—"



“Stop, Miss Ruthven,” said Richard, interrupting her; “do not speak of that night.”

“And why not?”

“Because a secret was stolen, treacherously stolen, from me then. If you wish me to respect you, let me forget that a theft was committed; let us forget the name of the thief.”

“And you think I will not use my knowledge?” she said, with a smile which was meant to be scornful, but which really only suggested uneasiness.

“I have not thought about it,—I may never think of it. You have attained an end; let me forget the means by which that end was gained.”

“You seem to forget that you had threatened my family; you seem to forget that—”

“Miss Ruthven, I forget nothing,” he replied gravely. After a pause, he added, “Have you any further orders?”

"I was sorely tempted," she murmured, ignoring his question. "I tried to beat down my curiosity, but it was of no use. The wish to know your secret grew into a madness. I thought it was my duty, indeed I did; and you know it was my duty. I—"

Again he interrupted her. "Miss Ruthven," he said, "have you any further orders?"

She looked up into his face, bit her lip, and answered, "No." He lifted his hat from his head, and left her.

And this was the end of her indignant protest against his rudeness! She was left hot and discontented, while he walked away calm and victorious. Yes, he was the conqueror,—she the vanquished. She had called him to her to denounce him, and he had scornfully left her in the midst of her apologies—apologies made to *him* of all others! It was galling to her pride, terribly galling.

“And yet,” she said, “what else do I deserve? I struck a foul blow when I opened his desk. How he must despise me!”

Her head was turned towards the sea, and, as she gazed into the waters, the tears sprung to her eyes. As she sat thus, her thoughts travelled back to the past, and a sad smile stole over her face as she pictured to herself what might have been. Not for long, though; soon the present took the place of the past, and she could only see the blank future, and then once more her eyes were filled with tears.

“No hope, no hope!” she murmured, with her wet cheek resting on her hand. “He will never know it. Great Heaven, why was I ever born!”

There she sat for more than an hour. At length she rose and made her way to her cabin. As she passed through the saloon, she met Richard Harwood. The young man

stopped to allow her to pass. She smiled as she saw him.

“ Good night, Mr. Harwood.”

“ Good night, Miss Ruthven.”

“ I hope you are not angry about what I said to you just now. I am not very well, and I fear my poor head—”

“ Do not say another word, Miss Ruthven,” Richard replied; and he started slightly as he saw her eyes lighted up by one of the saloon lamps. “ I can assure you I considered that you did me great honour in deigning to address me.”

“ We are friends, then,—at least till we get home.”

“ I am only too pleased to hear you say so. By all means let us be friends, until we get—‘ home!’ ”

“ Good night, then.”

“ Good night, Miss Ruthven.”

As he returned to the deck, he murmured to himself, “ So my enemy’s eyes were red

with weeping. She has a weak point in her armour; it must be my duty to find out where."

He sat for hours on the deck, smoking cigars, and rapt in thought. His meditations were interrupted by the appearance of the young officers, Thompson and Streater, who entered into a lively conversation about the proposed amateur theatricals.

The next morning the whole ship rang with the news. 'Plot and Passion' and a farce were to be played in the "Theatre Royal, Punjaub." Not only this, permission had been obtained from the Captain for the appearance of ladies in some of the characters. A sprightly young "grass widow" at once claimed the part of the pert waiting-maid, and her claim was at once allowed. But the difficulty was to find a representative of "Marie de Fontanges." The ladies on board declared that they would not play the part. Marie was too *triste*, too senti-

mental for them. It was not a nice *rôle*. They infinitely preferred the characters in the farce.

"What is to be done, my dear?" said Mrs. Tremenheere, wife of the Commanding Officer of the Upper Koosh District; "who can play it?"

"Why not ask Miss Ruthven?" said a bashful voice. As the voice belonged to Mrs. Brown, the wife of the well-known Indigo Merchant, no one paid it the smallest attention.

"It is very annoying that we can find no one," observed Mrs. Smith (the better half of the Commissioner of that ilk), ignoring Mrs. Brown and her voice, as if neither had ever had an existence.

And the talk went on. After several hopeless schemes had been discussed, Mrs. Tremenheere struck upon a new idea. "Why not ask Miss Ruthven?"

Everybody (including poor snubbed Mrs.

Brown) applauded the notion, and a deputation was at once formed, and dispatched to seek out Miss Ruthven, and ask her to play.

Naturally, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Tremeneere were selected, as the most influential persons in the assembly; and these two distinguished ladies at once set off on their mission. They very quickly found Edith.

“My dear,” said Mrs. Smith—she always called Edith “my dear;” wasn’t the girl the niece of a baronet? “We want you to do us a little favour.”

“You really must, my dear,” put in Mrs. Tremeneere; “we can’t possibly do without you.”

“What is it?” asked Edith, smiling at their earnestness.

“We want you to play Marie de Fontanges in ‘Plot and Passion.’ Now, you really mustn’t say no,” replied Mrs. Smith.


Edith hesitated. “I know nothing of

acting," she said; "and moreover my aunt is ill, and I am obliged to be in constant attendance upon her."

"Oh, I *know* you can act," urged Mrs. Smith; "and *really*, my dear, you might leave Lady Ruthven for a couple of hours, for once and away. You know your aunt has her maid, and you could be summoned (if necessary) at a moment's notice.

Edith consented to take the book. She sat down, and began to read it listlessly. By-and-by she began to study it with greater interest; and when she came to the last act (in which Marie prays Henri to forgive her for having betrayed him), her bosom heaved and her eyes swam with water. When Mrs. Tremenheere returned for her answer, she asked two or three questions about the actors of the different parts; at last she said, "And who plays De Neuville?"

"Oh, the young millionaire from Australia," replied Mrs. Tremenheere; "Mr. Richard Harwood."



“ Well, I will do my best,” said Edith, with a smile ; “ I accept the part of Marie.”

Mrs. Tremenheere hurried off, delighted with the success of her mission.

“ Will he understand my meaning ?” Edith murmured, when she was alone. “ My God, why was I ever born !”

END OF VOL. I.

PRINTED BY TAYLOR AND CO.,
LITTLE QUEEN STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS.



